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Ungoverned Masculinities: Gendered Discourses of Neoliberalism in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*

Christopher Barnes

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**UNGOVERNED MASCULINITIES: GENDERED
DISCOURSES OF NEOLIBERALISM IN *THE SOPRANOS*
AND *BREAKING BAD***

by

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THESIS

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**Ungoverned Masculinities:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the discursive intersections of neoliberalism and masculinity on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* through a critical discourse analysis in order to illuminate larger sociocultural issues concerning contemporary masculinity. *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* are praised in contemporary discourse as “artistic achievements,” and the following project interrogates particular moments in both texts that construct gendered discourses of neoliberalism, relying on the theoretical foundations of hegemonic masculinity. Through my analysis, I establish key moments when discourses about masculinity intersected with and connected to discourses about neoliberalism. Additionally, this project analyzes moral dimensions of neoliberalism within sociocultural discourse centering on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. I determine that the lines between entrepreneur and criminal have blurred as a product of neoliberal politics and economics, and argue that sociocultural discourse about the programs prioritizes profit making above socially responsible ethics and morality.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture,” *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott (2014) connects the deaths of Tony Soprano, Don Draper, and Walter White to the death of adulthood in America. These names are all characters on American television dramas: *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* respectively. So far, only Walter dies at the culmination of his series, *Breaking Bad*. The series finale of *The Sopranos* remains ambiguous about Tony’s mortality, and *Mad Men* has not yet reached a conclusion. Regardless, Scott (2014) sees these characters reaching their demises, whether they die or their lives are stopped by the last episode of their series. “Their deaths,” he writes, “were (and will be) a culmination and a conclusion: Tony, Walter and Don are the last of the patriarchs” (para. 3). The argument that the fate of these men signals an end of patriarchy and subsequently adulthood raises a number of questions about television’s relationship to culture.

Why do critics like Scott see the death of these characters as marking an end to patriarchy and adulthood? What is about these characters that reveals underlying political, economic, and social tensions in contemporary American culture? Scott’s conclusion about the impact of *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* speaks to the need for a continued cultural and academic investment in these shows. Scott’s voice is one of many that thrusts popular television under a microscope, demanding an answer to the question of what these stories tell us about American culture. The current project shares this aim.

This thesis examines the discursive intersections of neoliberalism and masculinity on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* in order to illuminate larger sociocultural issues concerning contemporary masculinity. The present chapter details the background and context of these

shows, presents descriptions of each series and its impact, and offers an overview of the study's subsequent chapters. This project views these shows as communication artifacts that exist in the ritualized experience of continued audience consumption. As audiences watch, re-watch, and talk about *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, they engage, contest, and reproduce the social discourses and ideologies embedded in these television programs. The present project attempts to provide an innovative understanding of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* through a critical discourse analysis of the two series' representations of neoliberalism and masculinity.

Background

The Sopranos and Breaking Bad

The Sopranos is a television show about mob-boss Tony Soprano, who lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Carmela, and his two children, AJ and Meadow. Tony is managing captain of the Di Meo crime family in the beginning of the series, but soon becomes the head of this organization (Remnick, 2007). Tony's front is that he works as a "waste-management consultant," but he really makes a living through usury, extortion, illegal card games, hijacking trucks, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) scams, extensive real estate holdings, a local deli, and a strip club called Bada Bing! (Remnick, 2007). In the pilot episode, Tony starts suffering from panic attacks; he passes out during a family barbeque, which results in his doctor recommending psychotherapy with Dr. Jennifer Melfi. Tony is initially resistant to speaking with a psychiatrist, but his mental health and the therapeutic work he does in these sessions become central plot lines running through the entire series. These therapy sessions provide a unique window into the inner workings of Tony as a character, who struggles with his responsibilities, his relationship with his mother, and his own behaviors and expected social roles as a man, father, and crime boss.

Vince Gilligan created *Breaking Bad*, which premiered in 2008, lasted for five seasons, and ended in 2013. Gilligan's premise for *Breaking Bad* was to turn Mr. Chips into Scarface, which means transforming a harmless chemistry teacher into a ruthless methamphetamine producer and, ultimately, a killer (Nussbaum, 2012). *Breaking Bad* centers on Walter White, who, in the midst of financial struggle, learns he has inoperable lung cancer. In desperation, he enlists a former student to help him produce and sell methamphetamine to pay for his mounting medical costs and to support his family posthumously.

In the pilot we learn that Walt is a lower-to-middle class family man, working at a local public school in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and moonlighting at a local carwash for extra money. His wife, Skyler, is pregnant and his son Walt Jr. has cerebral palsy. The show's title refers to a southern colloquialism—"to break bad"—which essentially means "to go bad" (Lotz, 2014) and alludes to the continual transformation of Walter White throughout the series; indeed, he starts off as a quiet and meek husband, but another man emerges as he begins to produce and sell methamphetamine. Walt soon learns that his chemistry skills allow him to produce a superior product to the conventional street meth, and this achievement paves the way for the ensuing chaotic narrative of its five seasons.

The Sopranos and *Breaking Bad* both emerged near the end of the twenty-year period of industrial change for US television that Lotz (2014) calls a "multi-channel transition" (p. 29). Beginning in the mid-1980s, the television industry began to gradually change its technological, economic, and distribution standards, creating a context for these shows to surface (Lotz, 2014). These shows were designed to increase the male audience, "which always has been less substantial than that of female counterparts and showed signs of further losses at the time" (Lotz,

2014, p. 33). Lotz (2014) argues that *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* are among several male-centered serials whose popularity suggests a cultural anxiety about contemporary masculinity.

The Present Study

The present study attempts to shed light on certain aspects of this cultural anxiety through a critical discourse analysis of neoliberalism and masculinity presented on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. The following sections detail this project's purpose and rationale, and present its guiding research questions.

Purpose

The central purpose of this study is to analyze the discourses of neoliberalism and masculinity in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. My intention is to expand the literature on these shows by presenting a unique theoretical approach to analysis. To date, no project on these two series uses the intersections of masculinity and neoliberalism to understand how these shows function as social discourse. Similar to Lotz (2014), I avoid talking about a "crisis" in masculinity as being unique to, or originating during, the twenty-first century; rather, as Lotz notes, seismic changes in masculinity "can be traced from the late 1700s through the present" (p. 60). Thus, rather than attempting to demonstrate distinctions characteristic of the current era of masculinity in relation to others, I am more concerned with contemporary social and cultural configurations of and conversations about masculinity and neoliberalism and how these configurations and conversations are explored in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Rationale

Why *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* together? I chose these programs based on their similarities. Yes, *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* are different in many respects. One show is about a mob boss, the other is about a drug producer and dealer; one show is about a man who

struggles with the criminal life he was born into, the other is about a man who radically and intentionally transforms into a violent criminal. However, both shows present white male criminal protagonists, both of whom illustrate a quite controversial implication about masculinity—it can contain, and valorize, an overtly anti-social element: criminality. These shows are also representative of the current critically acclaimed “Golden Age” of television (Martin, 2013), and thus require critical interrogation. Why are they popular—and why now? What are the cultural implications of their popularity? Additionally, the series share unique characteristics worthy of cultural analysis.

Though this project is not a literary critique of the shows’ structures, the two series feature similar characters and these similarities ground the rationale of their paring. Both protagonists struggle with their health, Tony with his panic attacks and Walter with his lung cancer. Both protagonists use criminal means as their sources of income, and because of this, each character uses the accumulation of wealth (and the resulting ability to provide for their families) as a justification for criminal behavior. The two protagonists have similar business and familial relationships. Their biological sons are both named after their fathers (Anthony Soprano, Jr., and Walter White, Jr.), but are both neglected and disillusioned by their fathers. Each protagonist has a surrogate son character (Christopher Moltisanti and Jesse Pinkman), who assists in his criminal accumulation of wealth and is often treated more like a son than the protagonist’s actual biological offspring. Each surrogate son character has a drug problem and contends with their relationship with the central protagonists. The wives in these shows each struggle with their husbands’ criminal activity, but largely remain trapped in their husbands, and thus their own lives of crime, despite their emotional turmoil. These similarities demonstrate a peculiar illustration of contemporary masculinity, and, although these shows are handled

separately in my analysis, their similarities provide additional rationale for their joint investigation. Finally, even though these shows are similar in several ways, this investigation is primarily concerned with how these shows differ in their illustrations of masculinity and how this connects to larger economic, political, and social shifts from 1999 to 2013.

Contributions and political significance. This research project addresses both *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* in a single study. This pairing allows me to offer a comparison of these shows in light of recent important economic, political, and social changes. Additionally, this project uniquely approaches these shows by using a theoretical framework specifically designed to simultaneously investigate neoliberalism and masculinity. The political value and significance of this study lie in its interrogation of critically acclaimed popular series. *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* embody key anxieties of masculinity in America. Thus, it is crucial for cultural critics and academics to unravel the contradictions and tensions in texts like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* to understand how power, and messages about power, operate in the realm of popular culture. To this end, this study aims to offer a small contribution to the larger political projects of cultural studies and political economy of communication.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the current study are:

RQ1a: What discourses about masculinity and neoliberalism are constructed in *The Sopranos*?

RQ1b: What discourses about masculinity and neoliberalism are constructed in *Breaking Bad*?

RQ 2: How does masculinity, as constructed on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, relate to discourses about neoliberalism?

RQ 3: How do sociocultural discourses about *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* relate to morality within the context of neoliberalism?

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

The following chapters detail my theoretical framework, review the relevant literature for this project, and describe the methodological procedures of this study, respectively. Chapter Two offers the theoretical framework I use to investigate *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, presents the relevant literature concerning male representations in popular media, and ends with the literature specifically dealing with *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. Chapter Three identifies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary methodology for this study and also details the specific coding procedures I use in this project Chapter Four analyzes *The Sopranos*, Chapter five analyzes *Breaking Bad*, and Chapter Six connects these texts to wider sociocultural discourses surrounding masculinity and neoliberalism. Chapter Seven concludes this thesis with a summary of findings and a discussion of the study's theoretical contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first reviews the theoretical framework I use to approach *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. This section presents the concept of neoliberalism as a contemporary political condition, starting with definitions and moving to applications to modern identities. I then consider the implications of neoliberalism as it relates to day-to-day life. I subsequently consider ideology and how scholars understand ideology within media texts. I specifically point to patriarchy as an ideology within the current project and consider developments of patriarchy in families in the U.S. I then turn to a review of relevant literature on hegemony and masculinity, ending with Connell's (2005) model of hegemonic masculinity and its applications in subsequent scholarship.

The second section details male representations of popular culture, and specifically popular television. These representations correspond with varying systems of hegemonic masculinity, as they change through time and culture. I discuss the more traditional representations of men on television and discuss how these illustrations began to shift in the 1980s. Finally, I review recent academic work specifically dealing with *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Theoretical Grounding

This section presents the theoretical framework I use to analyze *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, considering neoliberalism, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity. This particular combination of theories offers a unique perspective on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* that considers gender and contemporary socioeconomic conditions.

Neoliberalism

Definitions. The term “neoliberalism” refers to both a political condition and an ideological approach to social life. McChesney (2008) defines neoliberalism as “the doctrine that profits should rule as much of social life as possible, and anything that get in the way of profit making is suspect, if not condemned” (p. 15). Proponents of this doctrine disparage government intervention and regulation in favor of freedom for business and entrepreneurship. The individual is the centerpiece of neoliberalism. Descriptions of neoliberalism often paraphrase Margaret Thatcher to invoke its qualities: there is no such thing as “society,” only the individual and his family (Hall, 2011; McChesney, 2008). Advocates see growing wealth disparities not only as a natural condition of the market, but also as incentives to fuel hard work, productivity, and growth which is thought to trickle down, creating universal prosperity (McChesney, 2008).

Neoliberalism promotes the infallibility of “free markets,” and, as such, any government regulation or organized social response from citizens or labor unions is thought to damage the outcome of a pure market solution (McChesney, 2008).

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2005) offers a more detailed definition. Neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Supporters of the neoliberal project argue that the state should never govern society, dictate to free individuals how to manage their property, or impose regulations on the economy (Hall, 2011). Here, the “God-given right to make profits and amass personal wealth” foregrounds politics and social relations (Hall, 2011, p. 706). Though proponents often champion limiting and shrinking governments to ensure minimal interference, governments

usually operate on the same scale but channel resources away from citizens and public organizations to large corporations in order to assist in their expansion and accumulation of wealth (McChesney, 2008; Theodore, Peck, & Brenner, 2011).

Neoliberal principles operate as a form of “common sense” and uphold principles such as self-management and individual responsibility (Couldry, 2008). Individuals should incorporate the economic market values of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness into their daily lives (Marzullo, 2011; Ong, 2006). Community engagement is sacrificed in lieu of engagement with the market to further personal wealth and sustain self-interest (Marzullo, 2011). Supporters of neoliberalism believe in “equal opportunity,” which, as a concept, is usually deployed to isolate sociopolitical conditions, forgetting the unequal material conditions into which various individuals are born throughout the world (Brodie, 2007; Connell, 2010). Thus, any program advancing the interests of dispossessed people is fundamentally unfair because it runs contrary to neoliberal notions of “equal opportunity.”

It would be a mistake to think of neoliberalism as a single, universal condition. Indeed, neoliberalism can vary throughout the world and, importantly, not all capitalism is neoliberal (Hall, 2011). Hall writes, “Neoliberalism is, therefore, not one thing. It combines with other models, modifying them. It borrows, evolves, and diversifies. It is constantly ‘in process’. We are talking here, then, about a long term tendency and not about teleological destination” (2011, p. 708). Indeed, neoliberalism exists within a “nexus of intersecting social developments” (Lotz, 2014). Because neoliberalism is complex, always incomplete, and “in process,” scholars often connect the concept to hegemony, which proposes that cultural relations are predicated on force and consent between various groups, a condition that is itself always incomplete and in process¹

¹ I provide a detailed definition of hegemony beginning on page 20.

(Gramsci, 1971a). Harvey (2005), for example, uses Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explain how consent to neoliberal systems is created through "long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional and national traditions" (p. 39). Hall (2011) sees neoliberalism as a "hegemonic project" (p. 728), pointing to the lack of resistance to its principles in economics and daily life.

Applications of neoliberalism to identity issues. Scholars use the concept of neoliberalism frequently in political economy work, focusing on macro social changes, but the concept is also used at the micro level. As mentioned, neoliberalism encourages self-interest, competition, self-management, and responsibility as universal values. But, neoliberalism also influences material conditions in relation to gender, sexuality, and race. Kingfisher (2002), for example, argues that neoliberalism is "an approach to the world which includes in its purview not only economics but also politics; not only the public, but also the private; not only what kinds of institutions we should have, but also what kinds of subjects we should be (p. 14)" Brodie (2007) claims that "neoliberal social imagery strives to embed market logics into the everyday calculations of who we are and how we should live our lives" (p. 100). Neoliberalism, then, can be seen as a concept that influences social behavior, intersecting with race, class, gender and sexuality at the social-structural level. Kingfisher (2007) views neoliberalism as a "naturalized and highly gendered construction of personhood" (p. 94) that impacts the material conditions of day-to-day life. It is crucial to emphasize that neoliberalism does not permeate *every* decision we make, nor is neoliberalism an ideology that governs people on a universal level; rather, neoliberal ideology can be enacted in various ways throughout different segments of social life and has a material connection to gender, sexuality, race, and class. Braedley and Luxton (2010) describe how neoliberalism affects material conditions for women through three

overlapping dynamics. First, because women are paid less than men they are more vulnerable to changes that negatively affect poor and working-class individuals in the market. That is, though neoliberal government deregulation can negatively affect all poor and working-class people, people who are already at a disadvantage (women, people of color, LGBTQ people) are affected most drastically (Braedley & Luxton, 2010). Second, women are frequently responsible for the unpaid work and social reproduction in private households, thus “neoliberalism not only assumes that wages reflect the value of work performed; it also takes for granted the appearance in the labour market of the worker” (Braedley & Luxton, 2010, p. 14). Third, elite men have a vested interest in sustaining their own privileges because they assist in the continual expansion of personal wealth and success (Braedley & Luxton, 2010). This final point speaks to the division of gender within neoliberal politics and mindsets.

These characteristics of neoliberalism connect distinctly to culturally celebrated versions of masculinity. Connell (2010) argues that masculinity is embedded in the politics of neoliberalism. She writes, “Its treasured figure, ‘the entrepreneur,’ is culturally coded masculine. Its assault on the welfare state redistributes income from women to men and imposes more unpaid work on women as caregivers for the young, the old, and the sick” (2010, p. 33). Again, though claims to “equal opportunity” create spaces for women to participate, these notions neglect histories of female oppression and contemporary material conditions, including the fact that women are paid less than men (Connell, 2010). Indeed, neoliberal characteristics of risk, self-management, responsibility, and wealth accumulation overlap significantly with received attributes of masculinity, and these attributes are also reflected in popular culture.

Risk and responsibility are central to neoliberalism. Risk under neoliberalism brings together political, technical, economic, and moral elements to inform economic decisions (Côté-

Boucher, 2010). Often conceived as positive, taking risks is a natural and healthy condition within markets and social life, though neoliberalism encourages individuals to differentiate between types of risk: “some risks are to be taken, while others are to be independently managed or avoided” (Côté-Boucher, 2010, p. 42). Risk is one area among many where neoliberalism and masculinity overlap significantly. Often culturally celebrated men embody risky behavior as an illustration of their dominant masculinity. For example, white-collar male criminals regularly take risks to reproduce their own masculinity and adhere to neoliberal pursuits of profit (Messerschmidt, 2014). However, these neoliberal/masculine characteristics are often not openly recognized and fall under the guise of “common sense.”

Couldry (2008), for example, argues that the truths of neoliberalism would be unacceptable if stated honestly, so, to ensure continued societal consent, those truths must be transformed into “common sense” rituals, such as those that take place in reality television. Couldry (2008) finds a connection between the forms of reality TV and the behavioral norms of the neoliberal workplace, which naturalizes conditions like competition and surveillance. Ouellette (2004) uses neoliberalism to analyze *Judge Judy*, a popular daytime television show where individuals settle legal disputes. She argues that the program “fuses television, neoliberalism, and self-help discourse” (p. 547) through the private space of the courtroom. The program “scapegoats the uneducated and unprivileged as ‘others’ who manufacture their hardships, and thus, require nothing more than personal responsibility and self-discipline in the wake of shrinking public services” (p. 533). These studies show how neoliberalism can make its way into our living rooms, intersecting with a variety of other discourses that can influence social life. They also demonstrate that popular culture is a site worthy of investigating neoliberal ideology.

The final point I would like to address here deals those who criticize the use of neoliberalism in academic work. Some political economists criticize the term “neoliberalism,” and those who employ it, as overlooking the complexities of industrial capitalism. Garnham, for example, recently said:

I don't think there ever was such a thing as neo-liberalism. There were certain people, who had different policy views based on different economic theories that favour, for various reasons, more market rather than less; but to lump them all together as neo-liberal is just lazy thinking. (Garnham & Fuchs, 2014, p. 124)

This statement fits with Garnham's (1986) call for scholars to avoid analyzing the ideological content of media because this makes it difficult to develop coherent strategies to resist industrial capitalism. Garnham's perspectives here resonate with the ongoing, overwhelmingly unproductive debates between cultural studies and political economy (Hesmondhalgh, 2007).

Morality within neoliberalism. If neoliberalism influences social life, this means that the concept has a tangible connection to morality. Neoliberal devotion to market solutions impacts social morality. Croteau and Hoynes (2006) explain that markets are *amoral*, meaning they make no judgment about what is bought and sold; there is no distinction, they argue, between products that might be good and products that might be harmful. Markets, for example, do not “prevent the production and sale of child pornography, crack cocaine, snuff films, or rocket-propelled grenades” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 24). Croteau and Hoynes also use slavery as an example of the amorality of markets: “For nearly 250 years, the United States had an efficient market system that dealt in the acquisition and sale of human beings. There was nothing inherent in market theory that guarded against slavery” (2006, p. 24). Decisions to limit

what is bought and sold are left to government regulation, which, as we have seen, is contradictory to neoliberal principles.

Under neoliberal ideology, moral and ethical judgments are often sacrificed for information or technical solutions favoring profits (Marzullo, 2011). It would be a mistake, however, to argue that morality is nonexistent within neoliberal approaches to economics and social life. Instead, neoliberalism *can* affect moral judgments of individuals, corporations, and social groups. How this plays out, however, is circumstantial and completely dependent on social content. For example, Adam (2005) demonstrates how neoliberalism interacts with morality through decisions about unprotected sex; the rhetoric employed by individuals who engage in unprotected sex fits distinctly within neoliberal characteristics of risk and individual responsibility:

Like the neoliberal rhetoric...while ostensibly democratic, nonjudgmental, and non-coercive, it has no place for the existence of vulnerability, naiveté, or the many not-so “rational” precipitants of unsafe sex. It also shifts “responsibility” completely onto the other, often without admitting what is being done. (p. 341)

Taken together, morality and neoliberalism provide a useful framework to understand how social behavior is limited and influenced through principles such as risk, self-management, responsibility, and individualism. And, just as Ouellette (2004) and Couldry (2008) show that neoliberal characteristics are manifested through the form and content of popular reality television shows, these qualities are also visible in certain depictions of individual characters on fictional television series.

Ideology

Definitions and applications. Contemporary definitions (Freeden, 2003; Barker, 2004) of ideology refer to it as the underlying motivations of thoughts and beliefs pertaining to sociopolitical conditions existing within particular societies. It is useful to think about multiple *ideologies* existing within a society, instead of one broad, all-encompassing ideology (Barker, 2004; Grossberg, 2005). Ideologies are sets of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that occur in a structured and continual pattern (Freeden, 2003). Barker (2004) explains that ideology refers to binding and justifying ideas of all social groups, ideas that do not require a representational concept of truth. Ideologies are also produced, reproduced, and consumed through social activity, such as media consumption (Freeden, 2003; Silverstone, 1994). Although it is recognized that audiences are quite active and aware before, during, and after media consumption (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Radway, 1984), part of this agency involves replicating and simulating ideological positions (Silverstone, 1994).

Traditional Marxist theory argues that the ideas that embody the dominant ideology in society are the ideas of the ruling class, meaning that ideology functions to rationalize the exploitation of labor, as doing so furthers ruling class interests (Barker, 2004). Under this definition of ideology, social relations are a “mystification of the market” that obscures class exploitation (Barker, 2004, p. 97). This conception of ideology is problematic for a number of reasons, including the neglect of autonomous agency and the confusing line between individual and the superstructural conceptions of ideology (Gramsci, 1971b). Gramsci (1971b) points out the flaws of one ideology existing in both individuals and the superstructure. According to Barker (2004), Gramscian ideology is the “ideas, meanings and practices which, while they purport to be universal truths, are maps of meaning that support the power of particular social

classes” (p. 97). Gramsci (1971b) describes ideology as “the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position,” and “struggle” (p. 35). Importantly, ideology, from this perspective, is not separate from “the practical activities of life but provides people with rules of practical conduct and moral behavior rooted in day-to-day conditions” (Barker, 2004, p. 97). Gramsci rejects the notion that social relationships are determined by transcendental forces such as the economy (Grossberg, 2005). Rather, Gramsci sees ideology as the site of struggle, where contradiction and inconsistency play out in a constant process (Grossberg, 2005).

Building on Gramsci, Hall (1981) uses the term *ideology* to refer to “images, concepts and premises that provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspects of social existence” (p. 104). Ideologies, for Hall (1981), do not exist in isolation, but are always grounded in situated contexts through a “chain of meanings” (p. 104). For example, from a liberal perspective the word “freedom” might connect to the individual or the free market, whereas, from a socialist perspective, “freedom” could connote collective action (Hall, 1981). Ideologies are not constituted through individual consciousness; instead, they are formed within and through ideology: “Ideologies produce different forms of social consciousness rather than being produced by them. They work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises” (Hall, 1981, p. 104). Writing specifically about television, Hall (1980) argues that ideological structures are an open system that exists through the discursive formation of the “wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part” (p. 138). Thus, it is impossible to see televised content outside of larger social discourses.

Analyzing texts (newspaper articles, television programs, magazines, etc.) for ideological meaning and content is valuable. Popular culture is a site continually immersed in ideological

struggles in production, reception, and the existence of the text itself as one discourse in a competing sociocultural landscape of language. Fiske (2002) writes, “television, records, clothes, video games, language...carry the interest of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and work in favor of the status quo” (p. 2). One aspect to the framework presented in the present project involves hegemonic masculinity, which requires a discussion of patriarchy.

Patriarchy

Definitions and applications. The present project emerges from the perspective that despite many changes in attitudes and behavior in Western society, patriarchy is still a relevant and enduring ideology which influences social relations and behavior. Patriarchy refers to the dominance of heterosexual men over every other category of person in society (O’Neil & Nadeau, 1999; Sultana, 2012). As an ideology, patriarchy inherently excludes and marginalizes those who are not heterosexual and male. Patriarchy “is classically defined as the supremacy of the father over his family members and the domination of men over women and children in every aspect of life and culture” (O’Neil & Nadeau, 1999, p. 94). The concept refers to male domination in both public and private spheres and the oppression of women by condoning abuses of power that violate women’s basic human rights (O’Neil & Nadeau, 1999; Sultana, 2012).

In addition, patriarchy affects the socioeconomic positioning of women and sexual minorities in tangible ways. Men control capitalist economic systems, leading to their positions as the primary beneficiaries of the cyclical reproduction of patriarchy. This ideological system exaggerates the differences between men and women and thrives through repeated cultural messages illustrating the subordination of women, often tied directly to consumerism and the endurance of capitalism (Mezentseva, 2000; O’Neil & Nadeau, 1999; Sultana, 2012). Capitalism

and patriarchy share the characteristics of power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, all of which affect social relations on personal and institutional levels (Sultana, 2012). Thus, patriarchal ideologies function in ways that oppose feminist ideologies, affording special privilege and authority to heterosexual, white, affluent, and educated men, and thereby reproducing men's dominant gender status in society (Lotz, 2014).

Patriarchy and the family. Original Marxist theory argues that women's subordination began with the development of private property that ensured the exploitation of women throughout the world (Engels, 1884; Sultana, 2012). Socialist feminists accept and use basic principles of Marxism, but develop it beyond areas that conventional Marxism neglected (Sultana, 2012). For example, socialist feminists understand reproduction through the labor of procreation, socialization, and daily maintenance, as well as the appropriation of women's labor through patriarchy (Messerschmidt, 1986). Theories concerning 19th century families in the U.S. generally accepted patriarchy as stable and permanent, sexually monogamous, and residentially immobile (Adams, 2010). The male head of the family controlled women and children, and also represented the family in the larger community (Adams, 2010).

Family theorists argue that the 19th century family formation brought about the weakening of the larger kin network in favor of the nuclear family (Adams, 2010). Twentieth century families before 1970 were characterized by the individual economic production of the male head of the household, whose family would follow him from place to place in search of employment (Adams, 2010). Family scholars see the period after 1970 through the 21st century as characterized by a distinct move away from patriarchal family structures (Adams, 2010). This period involves an array of structures: the small nuclear family; the vertically extended family; the horizontally extended family; the single person household; the single-parent household; the

same-sex relationship, with or without children; the cohabiting household, as pre-marriage or non-marriage; and the voluntarily childless couple (Adams, 2010). Current familial conditions also include high divorce rates, couples marrying later, a drop in fertility rates, and increase in single-parent families, an increase in the number of women working outside of the home, and an increase in the diversity of family forms (Adams, 2010; Skolnick, 1997). Clearly, patriarchal family structures are less of a social condition in the West now than ever before, but the global exploitation of women is still an enduring material reality. Therefore, the ideological existence of male dominance—reproduced through mediated messages—requires continued interrogation. Interventions from feminism and queer theory continue to dismantle patriarchal oppression, but this project is not complete. Sites of male dominance are not immune to these interventions, which is why many exist through a hegemonic process of struggle and contention.

Hegemony and Masculinity

Definitions and applications of hegemony. The term “hegemony” is frequently used in academia. In an attempt to not misuse the term, and to apply it with care, I return to the origins of the concept as presented by Gramsci. I align with Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli’s (2012) claim that critical scholars have not taken advantage of the full range of possibilities that the Gramscian notion of hegemony offers. Returning to Gramsci, then, involves an understanding of hegemony bound to the whole of social relations and material conditions (Martínez Guillem & Briziarelli, 2012). According to Gramsci (1971a), hegemony is characterized “by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent” (p. 80). It is vital to emphasize the consensual factor of this relationship. Dominant ideology is certainly wielded with significant power within this relationship, but that power is rendered possible by the consent of the less powerful groups. The

survival of the dominant ideology, then, is dependent upon dominant groups attempting to incorporate the interests of the public (or subordinate groups) into their agenda in order to ensure consent. Thus, “the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interest of the subordinate groups, and the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process” of articulation between these groups (Gramsci, 1971a, p. 182). Explicit in these descriptions is the understanding that hegemonic relationships change. That is, as the subordinate groups’ interests change, the dominant group must account for those changes and reinvent itself with those interests in mind in order to avoid jeopardizing consent. Though different “groups” must be described in definitions of hegemony, it is inaccurate to emphasize hegemonic systems as existing through binaries (Martínez Guillem & Briziarelli, 2012). There is not one subordinate group or dominant group; rather the system of hegemony involves a vast array of social groups and individuals, exercising various forms of social power, possession and dispossession, in a continued process of struggle.

For Gramsci, dominance in hegemony involves a strategic alliance between different ruling class factions that exercise social authority over dispossessed groups; these alliances form a “historic bloc” (Barker, 2004). A historic bloc never consists of a single socioeconomic class or category, but rather comprises a network of associations between and within classes (Barker, 2004). Ideology serves a crucial role in the formation of a historic bloc, since it binds competing groups together through the rationalization of domination (Barker, 2004). Importantly, ideology is distinct from hegemony in that ideology refers to a system of binding ideas, whereas hegemony “represents a quality of the social whole” (Martínez Guillem & Briziarelli, 2012, p. 296). Thus, ideology and hegemony are distinct, albeit intersecting, continual processes; the alliances formed are temporary and require constant re-negotiations and settlements (Barker,

2004). Social power is illustrated and enacted through discourse in hegemony, which is always “marked by and dependent on ruptures and fissures” (King, 2009, p. 370), encompassing a range of different modes of resistance and consent. Thus, when considering hegemony, it is not helpful to emphasize either dominance or consent in the relationship, but to attempt to understand the varying formation of conflicting interests within social identities enacted through discourse (Martínez Guillem & Briziarelli, 2012). Texts themselves are also implicated (Lull, 1995). Imbued with ideology, texts constitute hegemonic artifacts, whose consumption and existence rests in the social whole of the relationship (Lull, 1995).

The concept of hegemony is useful in understanding popular media. As mentioned, ideologies are reproduced and consumed in media (Freedon, 2003; Hall, 1980; Silverstone, 1994); thus, hegemony offers an entry point for understanding popular culture. Popular television is a distinct area where articulation between dominant and subordinate groups can be revealed. Bennett (1986) explains, “the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavor” (p. xv). Thus, this relationship “consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply spontaneously oppositional cultures, but it is rather an area of negotiation between the two” (Bennett, 1986, pp. xv-xvi). Therefore, “dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are ‘mixed’ in different permutations” (Bennett, 1986, p. xvi). Deconstructing the various and opposing ideological values latent within cultural texts allows critics to determine how ideology operates within popular culture.

Cultural studies scholars understand popular culture as “contested terrain,” where resistance and opposition evolve as ordinary accessories of audience agency (Rojek, 2009, p. 53). Hall (1998) writes, “In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the

double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it” (p. 443). Moreover, Hall claims, we must see popular culture dynamically as a historic process: “Emergent forces reappear in ancient historical disguise; emergent forces, pointing to the future, lose their anticipatory power, and become merely backward looking; today’s cultural breaks can be recuperated as a support to tomorrow’s dominant system of values and meanings” (Hall, 1998, p. 450). Indeed, the study of popular culture matters because it is where hegemony arises, and studying its artifacts allows for a partial understanding, a brief snapshot, of this relationship (Hall, 1998)

Masculinity. Although hegemony can be applied in a broad sense to cultural artifacts, the present study focuses on hegemony in masculinity. Gender is “constructed from cultural and subjective meanings that constantly shift and vary, depending on the time and place” (Courtenay, 2000, p. 1387). Gender stereotypes provide the knowledge and criteria for men and women to act in ways that are considered “normal” for their sex and gender (Courtenay, 2000). These stereotypes “provide collective, organized—and dichotomous—meanings of gender and often become widely shared beliefs” (Courtenay, 2000, p. 1387). Masculinity, like all categories of gender, is a social construction. Masculinity contains its own set of cultural assumptions about men, which change and shift according to cultural, historic, and societal contexts. Thus, masculinity is constantly subject to redefinition and cultural evolution. Masculinity “is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). Rather, masculinities are “configurations of practices that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836).

Masculinity is often defined by what it is not, namely, culturally specific conceptions of the feminine (Lotz, 2014; Mackinnon, 2003). Femininity is reserved for women and homosexual men, “to whom culture often imputes effeminacy” (Mackinnon, 2003, p. 830). Masculinity reproduces patriarchy when it creates criteria excluding women and queer individuals as feminine. Indeed, patriarchy is the foundation of masculinities in American culture, meaning that its construction rests on the privileges that white, heterosexual men are continually offered (Lotz, 2014). Thus, masculinity can often legitimize and reaffirm the systemic dominance of patriarchy. It is inappropriate, however, to think of masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive categories of behavior because doing so misses the fluid nuances of social life (Lotz, 2014). Thus, masculinity is only possible and conceivable in relation to other gendered categories like femininity, which avoids essentialized notions of singular forms of gender (Connell, 2005; Lindgren & Lélièvre, 2009). Gender is “social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body” (Connell, 2005, p. 71). Masculinity, then, is a social practice and order, inherently fluid, contested, and incomplete; but is also a social construction that, in its dominant forms, is bound to the oppression of women and other sexual minorities.

Hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the domination “of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of ‘common sense’ and conventional morality, defines ‘what it means to be a man’” (Hanke, 1990, p. 232). The term was conceived to attempt to explain how men behave within the system of patriarchy, including behavior that is often contradictory, complex, or even at odds with the political goals of male dominance (Hearn, 2004). Hegemonic masculinity is a pattern of practices allowing the continued dominance of heterosexual white men in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It

embodies the “most honored way of being a man,” requires “all other men to position themselves in relation to it,” and legitimizes “the global subordination of women to men” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Images and projections of white heterosexual men set the standards of ascendancy for other men within hegemonic masculinity (Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006). Thus, the most dominant standards of hegemonic masculinity define it as a set of masculine criteria that are almost impossible for the majority of men to achieve.

Very few men may be able to achieve the most dominant forms of masculine power within hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), but the theoretical value of the concept has less to do with who may be at the top of the system, and more to do with the struggle, or contest to get there. Additionally, the struggle towards ascendancy naturally involves multiple masculinities throughout networks of social life, and a range of entry points for a variety of consenting men (Lotz, 2014) Dominant hegemonic masculinity determines the standards that men struggle to meet, and though only a minority of men might be capable of meeting these standards, the hegemonic structure benefits all men because it reinforces the structure of masculine dominance and feminine subordination (Connell, 2005). Men who are culturally perceived to achieve dominant hegemonic masculinity are often upheld and celebrated. Connell (1987) writes, “the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone” (pp. 184-185). Popular media, then, give men access to visions of hegemonic masculinity, and the reproduction of these structures in cultural texts energizes the struggle towards these epitomes of masculinity. In other words, hegemonic masculinity is often “formed from the people’s common sense by, perhaps above all, television, film, advertising and sports as related to and received by huge audiences” (Mackinnon, 2003, p.

9). Though the above descriptions indicate that a variety of masculinities and masculine attributes could create the dominant ideology of hegemonic masculinity, one specific trait is essential to these variations: heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality is designated as the most stable and salient aspect of hegemonic masculinity. Courtenay (2000) explains, “Today in the United States, hegemonic masculinity is embodied in heterosexual, highly educated, European American men of upper-class economic status” (p. 1387). Integral to patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity advocates for the subordination and exclusion of those deemed feminine, homosexual, or embodying any other aberration from heterosexuality. Thus, the maintenance of masculine hegemony often involves men policing one another through feminizing insults and emasculating pejoratives. Pascoe (2007) demonstrates that this is clear in the behavior of high school boys, as they use the word “fag” to regulate and insult one another, while reinforcing masculine ascendancy. Dean (2013) explains that this type of “homophobia can be understood as both a gender and sexual identity strategy that solves the problem of identifying oneself as both normatively masculine and heterosexual by deriding gay men” (pp. 535-536). Here again, the definition of hegemonic masculinity *requires* an exclusion of what it is not: femininity, homosexuality, or any behavior perceived outside the boundaries of heteronormative sexuality.

Social constructions of masculinity and femininity vacillate and change. Thus, to maintain dominance, hegemonic masculinity must be *mobile* (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The articulation between dominant and subordinate groups creates the mobility of hegemonic structures (Gramsci, 1971a). That is, to maintain consent, dominant groups must incorporate the interests of subordinate groups into the agenda (Gramsci, 1971a). Thus, dominant ideologies move and change when necessary to maintain consent from subordinate groups, leading to

continued dominance; this type of mobility is fundamental to understanding hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lotz, 2104). Hegemony “is a historically mobile relation” and its “ebb and flow is a key element of the picture of masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p. 78). When the requirements to maintain patriarchy change, the “bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded” (Connell, 2005, p. 78). Thus, new “groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony” (Connell, 2005, p. 78). To understand systems of masculinity, it is essential to examine how hegemonic masculinities change and absorb new identities and manifestations. Central to understanding these systems is the determination of how they are “refurbished, reempowered, renegotiated, and reenvisioned...to meet the next historic turn” (Hanke, 1998 p. 186). Indeed, as is true of hegemony generally, the crucial element of hegemonic masculinity is not dominance but consent to the cultural standards set for masculinity, and the mobility of the system that allows for contradictions and challenges.

Lotz (2014) indicates the importance of mobility in hegemonic masculinity, explaining that “leading sociological theorists always viewed hegemonic masculinity as flexible in design” (p. 37). Operating within different subcultures and cultural groups, hegemonic masculinity does not characterize the type of power, contestation, or how masculinities are enacted and performed by members; rather the term describes the *process* and mutability of masculinities throughout an infinite array of iterations (Lotz, 2014). It is important, however, that these social complexities of masculinity do not obscure who maintains the most power. Thus, any analysis of masculinity must account for histories of oppression and dominance, *and* must comprehensively examine each unique moment and the surrounding context of how masculinity functions in particular

circumstances. One of the glaring reasons behind changes in masculine structures relates to the unmanageable expectations produced by the old, dominant structures of traditional masculinity.

Previous research demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity causes a host of negative health problems for men. In their study analyzing male narratives, Valkonen and Hänninen (2012) find a distinct connection between depression and the inability to live up to hegemonic ideals. Similarly, Emslie et al. (2006) argue that “hegemonic masculinity could be health-damaging, and even push men towards contemplating suicide” (p. 2255). Courtenay (2000) explains that asking for help or taking care of oneself are fundamentally perceived as feminine characteristics, so men avoid healthcare as a part of the struggle for masculine ascendancy. Instead, hegemonic masculinity advocates “the denial of weakness or vulnerability, emotional and physical control, the appearance of being strong and robust, dismissal of any need for help, a ceaseless interest in sex, the display of aggressive behavior and physical dominance” (Courtenay, 2000, p. 1389). Boon (2005) states that men “either embrace the mystic figure of the hero, which they inevitably fail to embody...or they reject the mythic figuration of the hero and thus fail to embody the culturally coded definition of a man” (pp. 309-310). Thus, realizations that traditional versions of masculinity are unattainable often lead to the restructuring of hegemonic masculinity, which adopts certain feminine characteristics and deviates from traditional masculinity.

As mentioned earlier, to maintain hegemony, dominant cultural groups must incorporate aspects of subordinate groups in order to ensure consent. Chapman (1988) argues, for men to “maintain hegemony it is in men’s interest to co-opt femininity,” concluding that “the future may be female, but I fear it will still belong to men” (p. 248). For example, stay-at-home fathers, men who groom extensively, and empathetic and sensitive men all have characteristics traditionally

perceived as feminine, and these characteristics circulate and incorporate into the hegemonic system (Korobov, 2009). The feminine “modifications of hegemonic masculinity may represent some shift in the cultural meanings of masculinity without an accompanying shift in social structural arrangements, thereby recuperating patriarchal ideology by making it more adaptable to contemporary social conditions” (Hanke, 1990, p. 245). Some authors make the argument that this process of adopting feminine characteristics means hegemonic masculinity must become less hegemonic to maintain hegemony. It seems, however, more useful (and less tautological) to understand this process as inherent to any hegemonic structure. As mentioned, hegemonic structures are mobile, so adopting new characteristics does not make those structures any less hegemonic; the dominant ideology of the structure is what changes, not the relationship. This adaptability, or articulation, ensures the consent of those dominated and, in this case, maintains patriarchy.

In addition to incorporating feminine characteristics, new versions of masculinity involve a reflexive, postmodern relationship with traditional masculinities. Mocking traditional masculinity through irony, self-deprecation, and failure signals an evolution in masculine systems. Korobov (2009) demonstrates that “hegemonic ideals may be partially reclaimed by (ironically) subverting heroic and macho masculine positions for an everyman form of masculinity that specializes in self-deprecation, playfulness, ordinariness, and nonchalance” (p. 298). Thus, the impossibility of ascending to a quintessential form of masculinity is reconciled through deflating the importance and seriousness of those standards. Despite these more traditionally feminine versions of masculinity, the pendulum can swing in the other direction to include violence, aggression, and anger.

Connell (2002) emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity must not be used as a catchall formula to study any one type of masculinity. Indeed, to understand hegemonic masculinity as always including violence, aggression, and anger would overlook the masculine complexities detailed above. But, when combined with an awareness of historical context, hegemonic masculinity can explain various forms of masculinity that include violence, aggression, and anger, especially when this type of behavior is expected or admired among men (Connell, 2002). Savran (1998) links the rise of individualism, private property, and personal autonomy to masochistic forms of masculinity that exist through self-discipline to regulate success and failure within industrial capitalism. Ta (2006) explains,

Disillusioned by his own false sense of sovereignty, this new self-regulating subject is the masochistic subject who, perceiving himself to be solely responsible for his successes and failures, must discipline and torture himself, not only as a means of thriving, but as an assertion of self. (p. 269)

Taking the historical context into consideration, interventions from feminism, coupled with social and economic challenges that have resulted in the steady decline of the income of white middle-, working-, and lower-class men, place the dominant male identity in a fractured and masochistic binding (Savran, 1998). Ta (2006) argues that this identity becomes a “divided self who at once laments his victimization but also depends on it as point of protest and identification” (p. 269).

Current trends in masculinity studies provide a greater understanding of the dilemma of male identities that enact forms of aggression and anger. Kimmel’s (2013) recent work focuses on new levels of white middle-class male anger in America. “To hear them tell it,” Kimmel (2013) writes, “white men in America are steamrollered into submission, utterly helpless and

powerless. They're failed patriarchs, deposed kings, and not only the 'biggest losers' but also the sorest" (p. 118). One example of this anger is the peculiar emergence of groups representing white male rights and fathers' rights, using the rationale that heterosexual men are oppressed. Kimmel (2013) argues it has to do with "a combination of an unyielding workplace and ideology of masculinity that promotes robotic stoicism over nurturing, competition over patience, aggression over justice" (p. 147). The white working class and lower class are closer emotionally now than in previous times in history, but this proximity has not driven men towards organized labor movements or political activism aimed towards wealth redistribution; instead, this anger is mobilized by the right wing (Kimmel, 2013). Again, in Kimmel's words,

Together they listen to Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh. And together they watched Brad Pitt initiate Ed Norton into *Fight Club*, searching for something—anything that would feel authentic, that would feel real. Middle- and working-class white men—well, they just are beginning to actually *understand* each other (2013, p. 205; emphasis in original).

This passage points to how such anger is reproduced and emphasized in popular media texts such as *Fight Club*. This anger also manifests in other negative ways for these men.

Depression is one of the many psychological maladies affecting white middle-class men. Kimmel (2013) argues that psychological healthcare fits with other challenges within hegemonic masculinity because, for men specifically, it often manifests as an endurance trial. Men go on suppressing doubt and feigning fearlessness in everyday challenges, masochistically proving themselves in the face of struggle; such behavior can often result in "depression, suicidal rage, and a simmering numbness that some psychologists have even labeled mental illness called *alexithymia*—the socially conditioned 'inability to feel or express feelings'" (Kimmel, 2013, p. 218). Kimmel argues that it is no wonder that men find escape through media: "you get to be

king of a hill, blow everyone else up, score the winning touchdown, or just get even with all the bureaucratic impersonal forces arrayed against you” (2013, p. 218). Added to this list of cathartic gratifications would of course be the number of aggressive masculine acts displayed by Tony Soprano and Walter White; as a male viewer, you get to vicariously become the mob boss of New Jersey, or a kingpin drug manufacturer. Kimmel’s (2013) observations ultimately provide an entry point into possible reasons why popular television such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* offer angry male protagonists, and how these representations potentially connect to larger sociocultural discourses.

Ideology is a key factor in contemporary male aggression and anger. Kimmel (2013) describes the ideology of white, heterosexual, middle- and working-class men as one that “promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with tragically impoverished emotional intelligence” (p. 9). Here, “unparalleled acquisition” means the promise of economic freedom, opportunity, and upward mobility, all of which seem to be eroding in different ways for contemporary men in the United States (Kimmel, 2013). Middle-class American men are arguably the most fervent believers in the grand narrative of the “American dream,” which is the notion that anyone can rise to financial prosperity and success through hard work and determination (Kimmel, 2013). However, the developments of industrial capitalism have clearly restricted the material chances for equal opportunity to achieve the American dream. Though often directed at feminists and people in other precarious social conditions, Kimmel (2013) writes that the engine of men’s anger is “the growing chasm between rich and poor” (p. 25). This last idea speaks to the specific aims of the present project; I am interested in the point where neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity collide, and how this affects morality, as illustrated by *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Male Representations in Popular Television

This section considers male representations in U.S. popular television. I trace the changes of men on television from the 20th century to contemporary illustrations. This section ends with a review of current literature on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Men in 20th-Century Television

Historically, men have dominated television programs, while women and other sexual minorities have been regulated to the margins. TV series have reproduced this inequality frequently through the presentation of male-dominated heterosexual relationships. Often, female characters are defined by their “marital and parental status,” and “have a history of underrepresentation in television, and this lack of visibility has resulted in narrow and stereotyped depictions” (Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009, p. 174). Male characters “are portrayed as directive, venturesome, enterprising, and pursuing engaging occupations and recreational activities,” and, in contrast, “women are usually shown as acting in dependent, unambitious and emotional ways” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 701). In her content analysis of U.S. television between 1950 and 1980, Meehan (1983) laments, “American viewers have spent more than three decades watching male heroes and their adventures, muddled visions of boyhood adolescence, replete with illusions of women as witches, bitches, mothers andimps” (p. 317). These descriptions characterize historic male representations, some of which still exist. However, after the 1980s, representations of men on television began to change considerably.

In the final two decades of the 20th century, explicit patriarchal dominance on television shows shifted towards a variety of unorthodox illustrations of masculinity. Many modern television programs of this era did not illustrate patriarchy explicitly; instead, it was much more common to see representations of men behaving in ways that were superficially antithetical to

patriarchal aims. For example, representations of men acting sensitive or caring seemed to indicate a move towards gender equality (Hanke, 1990; Mackinnon, 2003). Furthermore, some representations explicitly illustrated failures in masculinity. The “first half of the century presented countless images of the upright white male, in control, dominating women and non-white males [while] the second half of the century has seen an increasing destitution and dereliction in the male image” (Horrocks, 1995, p. 171). The reasons for this shift are complex. Scholars cite the economic crises in Western capitalism during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the increasing demands of traditional constructions of masculinity (Horrocks, 1995). The interventions of second-wave feminism and queer studies into politically oppressive forms of masculinity played an additional role in the cultural struggle with masculinity and patriarchy and their reproductions in media (Lotz, 2014). There were unmistakable parallels between male representations in popular media and the rise of men’s rights activism noted earlier (Kimmel, 2013). New variations of masculinity did not mark the collapse of televised male dominance, however; rather, seen through the framework of hegemony, the array of masculinities performed on television served to reflect and reproduce the contemporary struggles of men. Moreover, many forms of aggressive and dominating men occupied, and continue to occupy, the televisual landscape—including the popular series *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Current Research on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*

A number of recent studies explore *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* in ways that are of direct relevance to the current project. Weidinger (2013), for example, discusses neoliberalism in the process of viewing *The Sopranos*, arguing that the series creates a psychological relationship with the spectator that allows room to challenge the neoliberal social agenda. He also claims that viewers go through a process of identification and dis-identification with lead character Tony

Soprano, through an autonomous, private experience. Other recent scholarship uses the lens of hegemonic masculinity but not that of neoliberalism to approach *The Sopranos*. Beale (2014), for example, applies the notion of hegemonic masculinity to his analysis of the protagonists in *The Sopranos* (Tony Soprano) and *Mad Men* (Don Draper). Beale (2014) analyzes Tony and Don through their platonic female relationships, arguing that these relationships point to a crisis of masculinity. Central to his argument is the notion that Tony and Don both exist within a series of masculine contradictions; they are able to capitalize on their white male privilege, but at the expense of their own emotional stability. Beale (2014) concludes that Tony and Don are unable to hold onto a traditional masculine identity, which demonstrates the shifting role of contemporary masculinity more broadly.

Other scholarship about *The Sopranos* often attempts to understand how the Soprano family fits into American life and the American Dream. Edgerton (2013), for example, claims the Soprano family's struggle to obtain the American Dream leaves them "empty, guilty, and searching for something more meaningful in their lives" (p. 59). For Edgerton (2013), this connects to the social disillusionment with the American Dream experienced by middle-class families in the 20th century. Toscano (2014) argues that Tony Soprano is both an American Everyman and a scoundrel, and this duality fundamentally disqualifies him from suburban life. According to Toscano, Tony "tries to live out the American Dream, but his path is criminal, making him an illegitimate citizen of suburbia" (2014, p. 451). Fields (2004) makes a similar observation, noting that "the Sopranos have nearly achieved a suburban ability to pass" (p. 614).

A number of anthologies approach *The Sopranos* from a variety of perspectives. Barreca's (2002) *A Sitdown with The Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on T.V.'s Most Talked About Series* offers essays that considering the show in relation to Italian American

culture. Rotundo (2002), one of the contributors to the Barreca anthology, examines how Italian American masculinity is presented in the series, demonstrating the collision between traditional Italian models of masculinity and the contemporary cultural contexts of *The Sopranos*. He concludes that the series is so successful because of the complexity of harking to old codes of masculinity while simultaneously presenting men who are full of doubt and struggle (Rotundo, 2002). Lavery's (2002) *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos* includes essays that range from examining the background music used in the series, to the food depicted in the show, to the cultural geography of North New Jersey. In "Fat Fuck! Why Don't You Take a Look in the Mirror: Weight, Body Image, and Masculinity in *The Sopranos*", Santo (2002) argues that fatness in the series suggests a world overwrought by consumption, where modern masculinity serves to reproduce consumption to the point of self-destruction. Taken together, these works provide insightful observations about *The Sopranos*. However, while a few of their contributions deal with the show's complex presentation of masculinity, none of them offer an analysis specifically constructed around the combined issues of neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity.

Such lenses are, however, used in recent research on *Breaking Bad*. Pierson's (2013a) anthology offers a variety of critical essays about the series, including his own contribution (2013b), which investigates the show's neoliberal discourse. In his essay, Pierson argues that the series supports neoliberalism in the areas of "criminality and law enforcement, drug policy and enforcement, entrepreneurship, and public schooling" (2013b, p. 16). The essay argues that proponents of neoliberalism view public school as incompetent, ineffective, and a threat to individual freedom; thus, Walt's transformation from public school teacher to a drug-manufacturing entrepreneur supports a neoliberal agenda. Pierson (2013b) claims that

proponents of neoliberalism view crime as just another market within industrial capitalism.

Without mentioning *The Sopranos*, he situates *Breaking Bad* as a gangster narrative, arguing that the self-interest and wealth accumulation that tend to be central to such narratives parallel the principles of neoliberalism. Pierson (2013b) also places methamphetamine in the growing category of performance enhancing drugs, claiming that it allows lower-class workers to work for longer hours. Ultimately, Pierson's essay claims that *Breaking Bad* makes neoliberalism accessible for audiences by illustrating "hard brutalities, risk/benefit calculations, and winner-take-all ethos best associated with neo-liberalism" (2013b, p. 30).

In the same anthology (Pierson, 2013a), Faucette (2013) uses hegemonic masculinity as a framework to understand *Breaking Bad*, arguing that Walt embodies complex and contradictory models of masculinity that are the result of changes in society, the economy, and political systems. Faucette's essay follows Walt as he transforms from an ineffectual and weak man into a man who uses aggression and violence to meet his goals; Walt's masculinity grows in step with his criminality. Faucette observes that Walt's numerous illegal acts lend themselves to his growth as a dominant male through his aggressive sexuality after he becomes a criminal. Further, the essay shows that Walt transitions into a dominant male at the expense of his family and his own humanity (Faucette, 2013).

I end this literature review with observations from Lotz's (2014) *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century*. Lotz's (2014) book is broader in scope than the present project; she looks at a number of shows including *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Californication*, *Rescue Me*, *Breaking Bad*, *Hung*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Men of a Certain Age*. The sections of her book that focus on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* (among others) provide insights that inform the current project. One of the important observations running through the

book is the claim that many of her “cable guys” intentionally avoid blaming women for their struggles. Thus, the narratives of *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* refuse to enact explicit types of male dominance that oppress women as central antagonists, or root-causes of conflict (Lotz, 2014). Additionally, Lotz (2014) uses hegemonic masculinity as a way to understand the multiplicity of masculinities on television. She also cites neoliberal changes in the economy as reasons for the emergence of these characters, but, because of the breadth of her project, she cannot spend much time on any one show. She devotes more time to illustrating the similarities and contours of masculinity performed across the array of series she considers.

For Lotz (2014), televised masculinity in the 21st century involves an illustration of men who struggle with daily life, attempting to embody a different masculinity than that of their fathers:

All these series tell a story of the challenges experienced in the everyday lives of men who struggle with the responsibilities of family provision that burdened their fathers while simultaneously seeking to be a different kind of father, and often husband, than was common among the models of masculinity that preceded them. (p. 114)

This observation speaks more to demonstrating shifting qualities of masculinity than to a critical evaluation of the cable guys. Thus, the current project differs fundamentally from Lotz’s (2014) work because I critically investigate the discourses of hegemonic masculinity and neoliberalism preformed on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* and explains the ways they connect to contemporary cultural, economic, and political conditions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter first reviewed the relevant literature concerning the theoretical framework used in this project, including sections on neoliberalism, ideology, patriarchy, hegemony,

masculinity, and hegemonic masculinity. The second section discusses male representations in popular television, ending with academic work about *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

This chapter is broken into two sections. I first review Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as it applies to the current project. Then, I detail my data analysis protocols, including descriptions of my sampling and coding procedures.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Definitions and Applications

Before describing the CDA approach, it is necessary to define the term “discourse.” Scholars use “discourse” in a variety of ways. It can refer to meaning-making within a social process, the language associated with a social field or practice, or a way of constructing aspects of the world from a particular social perspective (Fairclough, 2012). Jørgensen and Phillips (2004) define discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world” (p. 1). Discourse, as a type of communication, usually connects to different worldviews, political perspectives, and ideologies (Fairclough, 2012). Discourses are structured based on the varying types of communication that pertain to different aspects of social life (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2004). They are semiotic ways of constructing the world through physical, social, or mental forms of communication (Fairclough, 2012).

Scholars that study discourse approach communication with a distinct set of assumptions. Informed by Burr (1995) and Gergen (1985), Jørgensen and Phillips (2004) define four assumptions of discourse analysis that shed light on the ontological characteristics of this method. The first is a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge, meaning that there is no objective truth or knowledge about the world. The second is an understanding that discourse always has a historical and cultural specificity; that is, the trajectory of history and culture

grounds the way humans communicate and understand the world. The third assumption establishes a link between knowledge and social process. Jørgensen and Phillips (2004) write, “Knowledge is created through social interaction in which we construct common truths and compete about what is true or false” (p. 5). The fourth assumption forms a link between social knowledge and social action, meaning that social action is always bound to particular worldviews that naturalize certain behaviors while excluding others. Thus, the construction of the social life through discourse has material consequences.

CDA emerged in the early 1990s, after a small symposium in Amsterdam, where Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak laid its foundations (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA’s core objective is to reveal ideologies and power in written, spoken, or visual texts through systematic methods (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). A “social practice” in CDA is a relatively stable form of social activity, such as classroom teaching or family meals (Fairclough, 2003). CDA’s central assumption is that language is a form of social practice, implying a dialectical relationship between discursive events and the “situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Discourse, then, is socially constitutive and socially conditioned, helping to both maintain and reproduce the status quo and contribute to transforming it as well (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Fairclough (2012) describes discourse relating to social events and social practice in three primary ways: “as a facet of action; in the construal (representation) of aspects of the world; and in the constitution of identities” (p. 11). In other words, CDA sees discourse as a type of action, a way of constructing the world through representations, and a way of constructing identities.

Language and power. CDA focuses on language systems, and sees these systems as shaping society as well as being shaped by society (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Importantly, CDA is not interested in language itself, but in the ways in which social transformations change discourse, and in how discourse contributes to social transformations (Fairclough, 2003; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2004; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Economic, social, and cultural power change language and society, meaning that “power is transmitted and practiced through discourse” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). Thus, language is not a mere reflection of pre-existing reality, nor is it a single system of meaning; instead, language is an array of discourse systems, and these systems create discursive patterns that are maintained and transformed through social practices and social power (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2004).

CDA approaches language through a belief that discourse is always doing the ideological work of advancing and naturalizing the interests of dominant groups (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). CDA scholars, then, look for embedded ideologies in discourse. The ideological structures of discourse are most effective when they are invisible or taken as “common sense” (Fairclough, 2009). Thus, scholars that use CDA attempt to reveal latent ideologies in texts. As Fairclough argues, “If one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is sustaining power inequalities at one’s own expense, it ceases to be common sense, and may cease to have the capacity to sustain power inequalities” (2009, p. 71). The view that discourse renders power and power relations invisible is shared throughout CDA scholarship; modern power, manifested through networks and alliances of dominant groups, is self-regulating and subjugates marginalized or other less powerful groups (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The CDA approach is uniquely suitable for the current project because it specifically takes into account neoliberal politics as a force that transforms and guides discourse.

Neoliberalism and CDA. CDA scholars utilize critical theory into the study of discourse analysis. The aim of critical research is to better understand social relations through the consideration of who benefits the most (and the least) from current structures of power (Fairclough, 2003). The critical component of CDA investigates power relations, and their material consequences, with an eye toward social justice and change (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2004). Wodak and Meyer (2009) argue that the critical nature of CDA should address the totality of power in society, using an interdisciplinary approach that includes economics, sociology, history, political science, and psychology. Thus, the present project blends aspects of cultural studies, political economy, and CDA to understand how dominant ideologies function in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. Although these programs are fictional narratives, I argue they constitute a type of televised discourse that illustrates and reproduces naturalized power relations, and the popularity of each speaks to possible material consequences of each discourse. Fairclough's (2003) CDA is particularly suited to the current project because of his critical approach towards neoliberalism and the language of new capitalism.

Fairclough's (2003) term "new capitalism" refers to the contemporary transformations of capitalism, globalization, and neoliberalism; he argues that a "better understanding of these changes and their effects, and of possibilities to inflect them in particular directions, or resist them and develop alternatives, is widely seen as crucial to improving the human condition" (p. 203). Neoliberal politics, like any political project, is forged through discourse that is often conceived as a natural economic and political evolution (Fairclough, 2003). Thus, approaches to CDA should pay particular attention to neoliberal discourse throughout different avenues of communication. Though many CDA scholars analyze language as written or spoken, this

approach considers other forms of communication as discourse, including but not limited to nonverbal communication, visual images, and mediated messages (Fairclough, 1995).

Critical Analysis of Media Discourse

The analysis of media content and messages, including film, television, music, and advertising texts, is central to the field of media studies in communication (Stokes, 2013). There is a distinct overlap between the approaches to analyzing media undertaken by scholars of semiotics and of discourse analysis. Both approaches seek to explain the implications and meanings of texts, their ideological content, and how their messages relate to cultural myths (Stokes, 2013). Discourse analysis, in particular, focuses on ideological components of media messages, viewing audio, visual, verbal, and nonverbal messages as discourse—a type of language.

Visual aspects. Rose (2012) offers three recommendations for scholars who study visual culture through the critical lens of CDA. First, scholars must take images seriously, meaning that any investigation of a visual message, such as a television program, must examine visual messages carefully. Second, wider sociocultural discourses must be considered in relationship to visual texts because they “depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions” (Rose, 2012, p. 16). Thus, a critical approach must address representations with an eye toward historic and cultural formations, as well as their implications (Rose, 2012). Third, scholars must consider their own way of looking at visual images, which requires the reflexivity common to all good qualitative research (Rose, 2012). Just as no two people will interpret a story the same way, no two researchers will likely interpret visual images in the same way; we all bring our own experiences, value systems, and unique personalities to understanding visual messages (Saldaña, 2013). Thus, textual analysis (visual or otherwise) requires both a thorough and detailed account

of the particular artifact under investigation and significant reflexivity throughout the process of data collection (Rose, 2012).

Though her version of discourse analysis is primarily informed by Foucault, Rose (2012) establishes a helpful framework for approaching visual texts, such as television shows. According to this method, scholars can analyze visual culture at three different sites: the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text (Rose, 2012). Each of these sites has three potential modalities. First, scholars can examine the technological components of a text. This modality focuses on the particular medium used to convey the message. The second modality is compositional, which refers to how the text is made, or the text's material qualities. Third, scholars can examine the social modality, which refers to "the range of economic and social and political relations, institutions, and practices that surround an image through which it is seen and used" (Rose, 2012, p. 20). Since the current project does not only use visual methodologies to analyze *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, the visual elements of these programs must be considered as they are integral to the text's material existence (Fairclough, 1995). Thus, inspired by Rose's (2012) model, I investigated textual sites of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* by focusing on the social modality.

Narrative discourse analysis. Certain critical scholars apply discourse analysis to narratives. According to Thornborrow (2012), stories are "integral to the way we structure, account for, and display our understanding of our human condition and experience" (p. 51). Thus, analyzing narratives through discourse is crucial for understanding how we make sense of the world (Thornborrow, 2012). Given the assumptions that discourses are historically specific and culturally dependent, scholars who use discourse analysis to understand narratives see the structure and content of stories as transformed through cultural, economic, and political changes

(Grossberg, 1984). Building on the work of Jameson (1977,1979), Grossberg (1984) argues that narratives demonstrate latent contradictions embedded in class struggles and social positions. Narratives, in effect, “rechart” class struggles in order to make sense of and manage these struggles (Grossberg, 1984). In certain instances, narratives repress contradictions through ideological forces by providing an imaginary or cathartic solution to class struggles (Grossberg, 1984). Thus, cultural narratives can stimulate sociopolitical anxieties and fantasies, which can manage or repress class struggle (Grossberg, 1984). Grossberg’s observations are central to understanding the popularity of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. I used this framework for understanding narratives as illustrations of class position and struggle along with Fairclough’s (1995) broader recommendations for CDA in media analysis.

Critical media analysis and the current study. Critical media discourse involves three dimensions of analysis: text, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices (Fairclough, 1995). The first level of analysis is the media text itself. Media texts can be written or oral, or aural and visual, as in the case of television. The analysis of texts emphasizes meaning and form, using a multi-semiotic approach. This means that if the text is a television program, the images, sounds, speech, and organization must all be taken into account. The second level of analysis involves discourse practice, meaning the processes of production and consumption surrounding the text. The final level analyzes the sociocultural practice, which is the set of wider social and cultural discourses that surround the text. The sociocultural level involves an analysis of the immediate “situational context, the wider context of institutional practices that the event is embedded within, or the yet wider frame of the society and culture” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 62). Though the current project is informed by Rose (2012) and the larger project of CDA, I focused on how

textual moments in these shows connect to wider sociocultural discourses. Fairclough (1995) supports emphasizing one or two aspects of his three-part model, depending on the project.

Data Collection Protocols

Overview

The current study uses qualitative coding as the primary method for data collection. A code in qualitative inquiry is a word or short phrase that assigns “a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). The goal in qualitative coding is to identify codes that create patterns and facilitate the development of larger categories and themes (Saldaña, 2013). Rossman and Rallis (2003) describe the difference between categories and themes: “Think of a category as a word or phrase describing some segment of your data that it is explicit, whereas a theme is a phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit processes” (p. 282). Saldaña (2013) suggests that qualitative coding should be done in two cycles. First Cycle coding is general and open-ended, whereas Second Cycle coding involves focused attempts to connect the codes identified from the first cycle. He offers a variety of types of coding that can be done for each cycle. I follow Saldaña’s approach in the current study and detail my selections for coding processes below, beginning with precoding protocols.

Precoding Protocols

Precoding involves an initial exposure to data for the purpose of highlighting portions and moments that strike researchers as directly related to their research questions (Saldaña, 2013). Because qualitative coding is emergent, precoding allows researchers to begin formatting data to facilitate an organized entry point into First Cycle coding. Saldaña (2013) recommends the use of code sheets organized into three columns for precoding: “The first and widest column

contains the data themselves...the second column contains space for preliminary code notes and jottings, while the third lists the final code” (p. 17). The specific way the current study uses precoding strategies involves watching both *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* in their entirety to find “codable moments” that relate to my research question (Boyatzis, 1998). This process is necessary because of the sheer amount of textual data in each of the shows. *The Sopranos* series comprises six seasons, totaling 86 episodes, and *Breaking Bad* comprises five seasons totaling 62 episodes. Thus, it is initially crucial to narrow these collections of texts and determine which specific scenes and moments are most relevant to the current project.

Analytic Memos

Analytic memos allow researchers to document and reflect on “coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data—all possibly leading toward theory” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 40). Analytic memos provide a space for researchers to reflect on their project, but also allow researchers to challenge their own assumptions and recognize how their thoughts, personality, and worldview influence their coding (Mason, 2002). Saldaña (2013) suggests categorizing these memos along with the data corpus to further guide the investigating and continue to build connections to theory. He writes, “I simply write what is going through my mind, *then* determine what type of memo I have written to title it and thus later determine its place in the data corpus” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 42). For the current study, I also wrote analytic memos throughout the coding process which connected moments in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* to the intersections of neoliberalism and masculinity.

Sampling

This project utilized criterion sampling to obtain data from *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. Criterion sampling means that the sample of data was chosen “on the basis of an explicitly stated criterion” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 112). A typical way of building criteria for criterion sampling is to use theory as a way of structuring inclusionary and exclusionary definitions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Therefore, the sampling criteria for the current study were derived from the theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism, hegemonic masculinity, and structured action specifically portrayed on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

First Cycle Coding

First Cycle coding is a systematic coding cycle that occurs after precoding procedures. The following sections detail my selections of First Cycle coding procedures informed by Saldaña (2013).

Narrative Coding. Narrative Coding applies the conventions of literary elements to qualitative texts that are formatted as stories. Saldaña (2013) explains that narrative analysis is particularly suitable for investigations into identity, as well as social and cultural meanings and values. He also offers a coding scheme for researchers who use narrative coding. Narrative analysis should investigate “story type; form; genre; tone; purpose; setting; time; plot; storyline; point of view; character type; characterization; theme; literary elements; spoken features; conversation interaction” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 135). I did not attempt to code for this entire list in the current project; instead, I coded for only those elements in the above list that directly related to my research questions and theoretical framework, bearing in mind Grossberg’s (1984) observation that stories often connect to class struggle, and extending that observation to social

struggles that concern gender. I specifically coded for plot, dialogue, action, and characterization during Narrative Coding.

Process Coding. Process Coding looks for action, using gerunds (“-ing” words) to describe actions that are taking place (Charmaz, 2002; Saldaña, 2013). Process Coding can either code observable activities such as “reading” or “watching TV,” or more conceptual actions such as “struggling,” “negotiating,” “surviving,” or “adapting” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 96). Though process coding is suitable for most qualitative studies, it is particularly useful when there is ongoing action and interaction (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). Process coding was useful for coding both observable activity and conceptual action in terms of characters in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Values Coding. Values Coding focuses on values, attitudes, and beliefs in qualitative data (Saldaña, 2013), and is therefore particularly useful for studies that explore cultural values, identity, and experiences. Values Coding was essential to the current project because I focused on the ideological values latent in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. I specifically searched for how characters on these shows illustrate and reproduce neoliberalism and dominant forms of masculinity, and this type of investigation involved understanding character values. I did not attempt to code for every value held by the characters in these shows; rather, I specifically focused on those values that relate to neoliberalism and masculinity.

Second Cycle Coding

Second Cycle coding focuses on reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded within the first cycle. The primary goal of Second Cycle coding is to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207). The current project used Elaborative Coding and Axial Coding (Saldaña, 2013)

Elaborative Coding. Whereas grounded theory approaches suggest avoiding entering a project with a theoretical framework, the current project approached *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* with a combination of theories. Elaborative Coding is useful when researchers attempt to elaborate on or develop a theory further (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Saldaña, 2013) Because this project uses neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity to understand *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, elaborative coding involved linking codes, categories, and themes back to this theoretical framework.

Axial Coding. This project also used Axial Coding within the Second Cycle of coding. Axial Coding involves developing a new set of codes that are designed to describe the connection between the already existing codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). During Axial Coding the researcher prioritizes the dominant codes against the less important; reorganizes the data set; narrows the data set by eliminating and combining codes; and selecting the best representative codes to incorporate into the analysis (Boeije, 2010).

Chapter Summary

This chapter details the methods used in the present study. I first reviewed the framework of CDA as it applies to the current project and subsequently detailed the data analysis protocols used for this project.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SOPRANOS

This chapter addresses the discourses of masculinity and neoliberalism present in *The Sopranos*. The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I explore the relationship between usury and masculinity in the series. Second, I describe the exclusion of women from the strictly white all-male world of financial success. The last section presents discourses of masculinity and neoliberalism as they are presented through stories about labor unions and public housing.

The Sopranos is a television show about mob-boss Tony Soprano, who lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Carmela, and his two children, AJ and Meadow. Tony is boss of the Di Meo crime family. His front is as a “waste-management consultant,” but he really makes a living through usury, extortion, illegal card games, hijacking trucks, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) scams, extensive real estate holdings, a local deli shop, and a strip club called Bada Bing! (Remnick, 2007). The show follows Tony through his domestic struggles with his family, his risky criminal activity, and his psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Jennifer Melfi.

Usury and Masculinity

Although Tony Soprano and his crew are involved in a number of criminal activities to finance their operation and sustain their livelihoods, these men depend on usury as a primary method of generating income. Usury is the illegal practice of lending money at exorbitant interest rates, and in the fictional world of *The Sopranos* this crime is often accompanied by physical violence and intimidation. Like drug dealers, Tony and his crew prey on individuals who are most vulnerable to usury: gambling addicts. The term “loan shark” is often used to describe an individual who engages in usury. Even though usury is illegal, there are connections to the practice within the modern neoliberal economy.

Krager (2015) explains that “credit is the cornerstone of the modern economy” (p. 75), allowing individuals in the middle and upper classes a method for flexible income as a cushion or in emergency circumstances. Credit card payments are flexible for those with a good credit score and the repayment of the loan is “secured by the borrower’s fiscal probity and their desire to maintain good credit” (Krager, 2015, p. 15). Loan sharks, often backed by organized crime, historically provide credit options for members of lower classes, who are often threatened to repay loans with physical violence and death (Krager, 2015). Within the fictional world of *The Sopranos*, the regular use of violence and intimidation to discipline borrowers and ensure loan repayment occurs frequently, usually centered on the series central protagonist, Tony Soprano.

From Father to Son: Johnny Soprano

Tony Soprano grew up in a criminal family. His father before him engaged in the same criminal activity Tony does, including usury. Throughout the series, Tony reveals a number of memories about his father and mother to his therapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi. Often these memories are portrayed as flashbacks, in which the viewer is taken back to Tony’s childhood. One such flashback occurs in episode three of season three, entitled “Fortunate Son” (Kessler & Bronchtein, 2001). In the flashback, young Tony Soprano is waiting for his father outside of Satriale’s butcher shop. At the time, a man named Francis Satriale owns the shop. In this flashback, Francis Satriale owes money to Tony’s father, Johnny Soprano. Johnny and his brother Corrado (also known as Uncle Junior) walk into the butcher shop to ask for repayment. Francis Satriale is evasive with the men.

Francis Satriale: Talk about good timing, I was just gonna call you, Johnny.

Johnny Soprano: Oh yeah? Someplace we could talk in private?

Francis Satriale: I’m kind of busy.

Johnny Soprano: Gonna call. Now you're busy.

Johnny and Corrado grab Francis and take him into the back of the store. At this point, young Tony Soprano enters the shop, despite his father's wishes that he stay in the car. In the back of the shop, Francis confesses that he cannot pay Johnny back. Johnny and Corrado then force Francis onto the butcher block. Corrado covers Francis's mouth while Johnny chops off his pinky finger with a cleaver. Unbeknownst to Johnny and Corrado, young Tony Soprano watches the entire violent interaction from the doorway.

Later that evening, Johnny confronts his son about the interaction. The scene starts with Johnny asleep on a living room chair with a newspaper draped across his chest. Young Tony wakes him up and tells him that dinner is ready. Johnny tells Tony to come to him and motions for him to sit in his lap.

Johnny Soprano: What you seen today, Anthony, a very sad thing. You disobeyed your old man. I ought to give you the belt. But, I gotta say a lot of boys your age would've run like a little girl, but you stayed.

Pride emanates from Johnny as he utters that last sentence; Tony's ability to witness violence without fear is defined as masculine. Johnny then explains to his son why he had to perform such a violent act:

Johnny Soprano: I know you like Mr. Satriale, we all do. He's a lovely man. The man is a gambler. He got over his head in debt. He owed me money and he refused to pay. He avoided me. That's why you should never gamble, Anthony. What was I supposed to do? That's my livelihood. It's how I put food on the table. You should never gamble, Anthony.

Johnny rationalizes the brutal act as necessary to his income. Without intimidation and the threat of violence against his borrowers, according to this logic, gambling addicts would take advantage of Johnny.

Tony Soprano tells this story, intercut with flashbacks, to his therapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi. Tony tells her this story because, shortly after the above conversation with his father, young Tony Soprano had his first panic attack. Panic attacks plague Tony throughout the series and these attacks often happen when he encounters mounting responsibility in his life. Dr. Melfi comes to the conclusion that this childhood incident was one of the first times Tony realized that he might have to assume the role of his father, and suggests that this is a possible explanation for the attack.

This story gives viewers additional important background information. Tony and his crew operate primarily out of two locations, the Bada Bing! strip club and Satriale's butcher shop. Until this flashback, it is unclear why Tony and his gang own a butcher shop. With this therapy-scene revelation, the viewer can now infer that Francis Satriale was never able to pay Johnny Soprano back, so the crime family inherited his business. Though this is never explicitly stated in the show, this conclusion is also apparent in light of other legitimate businesses that Tony usurps in the series.

David and Tony

Three episodes in season two tell the story of the demise of another business owner with a gambling problem, David Scatino, who owns a local sports store called Ramsey Outdoors, and who, as an adolescent, was Tony's friend. Viewers are introduced to David at a college information night at Verbum Dei high school—which Tony Soprano's two children, Anthony Jr.

and Meadow, both attend—in “The Happy Wanderer” (Chase & Patterson, 2000; season two, episode six).

At the college information night at the high school, David privately asks Tony if he can play in an “executive” poker game that Tony has taken over from his uncle Corrado, who is currently under house arrest. Tony and David walk down a deserted hallway in the high school.

David Scatino: Listen, uh, I heard through the grapevine that you’re taking over your uncle’s game. You know, the big one.

Tony Soprano: Grapevine.

David Scatino: Yeah.

Tony Soprano: You know, if you listen close to that song, it says believe none of what you hear and half of what you see.

David Scatino: No, it’s just, you know me...I like to play a little.

Tony Soprano: A little? Forget it. This game’s not for you.

David Scatino, No it’s just, you know, I was thinking it would be a kick.

Tony Soprano: David, you’re a nice guy, I like you okay. But trust me, this game’s not for you. I don’t want to see you get hurt. These guys, they play *deep*.

[At this point, David stops and turns to Tony with a confident seriousness.]

David Scatino: You know how many jockstraps I sold last week?

Tony Soprano: Not enough for this game, okay? Forget it.

The executive card game is a high-stakes poker game and throughout this exchange Tony is cautioning David not to get involved. The last exchange, however, indicates a masculine component to eligibility and access to this card game. David, in effect, is not man enough to play in this game. Tony’s phallogentric metaphor, “These guys, they play *deep*,” begins the

connection to masculinity, while David asserts himself by countering with a boast of how many jock straps he sold at Ramsey Outdoors. Here, money—both earning it and risking it—is intrinsically linked to masculinity.

Later in the episode, David shows up at the game despite Tony's warnings and the fact that he already has gone into debt to Richie Aprile, a "captain" under Tony who functions largely as an antagonist throughout season two. The card game has already started when David shows up. The game is held in a hotel by Tony and his crew. David knocks on the door to the hotel room and asks for Tony. After some convincing, Tony agrees to let David play. David has to borrow money from Tony to play and he assures Tony that the loan is just "short term." Tony responds with another warning.

Tony Soprano: Davie, don't say short if you don't mean short. All kidding aside. You understand what I'm saying to you?

David Scatino: Yeah, of course. Hey, you don't have to explain business to me.

The players are exclusively men, including members of Tony's crew (Silvio Dante and Paulie Gaultiere) and the New York gang (Johnny Sacrimoni). The game also includes Frank Sinatra Jr. and Dr. Ira Fried, a recurring character who assists Tony with criminal activity throughout the show. The viewer first learns what Dr. Fried does for a living during this game.

Paulie Gaultiere: Hey, Davie, ask the doc what his specialty is.

Johnny Sacrimoni: Hard-ons.

Paulie Gaultiere: I wanted him to ask.

David Scatino: Really?

Dr. Ira Fried: Penile implants.

Again, this executive card game is imbued with masculinity; not only is the game all white men, but it also includes a cosmetic doctor who specializes in enhancing male genitalia.

After the game, David has incurred \$45,000 of debt to Tony. At this point, Tony's relationship with David moves away from friendship into the realm of business, specifically usury through violence and intimidation. Tony confronts David as he washes his face in the bathroom of the hotel room.

Tony Soprano: I'm going to let you sleep one day. Then you're gonna get the fuck up and you're gonna go get my \$45,000...If after one day, you don't give me every penny, I'm gonna send somebody down to your joint every Saturday for five percent interest. If you don't have it, it gets tacked onto the principal. Do you understand?

David is not able to pay Tony back in this episode. He tries to evade Tony, but Tony finds him and violently beats him, reminding him of his debt. David withholds from his family the fact that he is in debt to Tony, and out of desperation forcibly takes his son's jeep to give to Tony as partial payment. Tony, in turn, gives it to his own daughter as a gift. Meadow realizes that the jeep is actually Eric's and runs to her room sobbing. Tony follows Meadow and yells at her. After shouting at Meadow that David Scatino did the right thing by offering up the jeep as partial payment, Tony emphasizes that David knew the risks going into the card game.

Tony Soprano: A grown man made a wager. He lost. He made another one. He lost again.

End of story, so, take that high moral ground and go sleep in the fucking bus station if you want!

Though it is clear that Tony recognizes the ethical dilemma of giving Eric's jeep to Meadow, the rationale here is that David is solely responsible for his own actions. In a

subsequent episode, “Full Leather Jacket,” (Chase & Coulter, 2000; season two, episode eight), Tony reiterates this rationale to his therapist, Dr. Melfi.

Tony Soprano: This kid’s father, he’s a fucking degenerate gambler. But he’s also a respected businessman in the community and everything that goes along with that...so it becomes my fault that he lost his kid’s car? I mean I gotta look out for him because he’s a sick bastard? My friend Artie Bucco’s got a restaurant, right? Now believe me, no one’s telling him to refuse a plate of fettuccini to some fat fuck that wanders in that’s eating himself to death.

Here, Tony’s rationale speaks to fundamental neoliberal principles, emphasizing personal responsibility and self-management (Couldry, 2008). After Tony’s analogy, Dr. Melfi proposes that Tony was playing the role of a father and preparing his daughter “for reality.” This suggests that a father is able to handle and teach his daughter about complex moral situations, to see who is really at fault in the world and to provide instruction on how to avoid being taken advantage of by people who seem vulnerable, like David Scatino.

Eric’s car only serves as partial payment to Tony. Several episodes later, in “Bust Out,” (Chase & Patterson, 2000; season two, episode ten), Tony and his crew drive David into planned bankruptcy. They steal sporting goods from Ramsey Outdoors and they force David to purchase airline tickets and other goods on the store’s credit until liquidators close David’s store and his family loses the business. During one scene David asks Tony why he let him play in the executive card game.

David Scatino: You told me not to get in the game. Why’d you let me do it?

Tony Soprano: Well, I knew you had this business here, Davey. It's in my nature. The frog and the scorpion, you know? Besides, if you would've won I'd be the one crying the blues right?

David Scatino: What's the end?

Tony Soprano: The end? It's planned bankruptcy.

[David starts crying.]

Tony Soprano: Hey, you're not the first guy to get busted out. This is how a guy like me makes his living. This is my bread and butter. When this is over you're free to go. You can go anywhere you want.

David continues to cry, leaving Tony visibly disgusted. He says, "Oh for Christ sake," and leaves David alone.

Tony's logic in this exchange speaks to themes of equal opportunity and the winner-takes-all ethos of neoliberalism (Pierson, 2013b). David's gambling addiction is referenced throughout the season, but Tony minimizes this condition: both Tony and David had an equal chance to win, according to the above interaction. Furthermore, David gets to "start over" after he loses his business, indicating that he still has the opportunity to achieve financial stability and success. The fact that David cries about his situation sickens Tony. Even though this "grown man" got himself into this situation, he is unable to deal with the consequences.

Artie and Tony

As a loan shark, Tony must adopt dominant forms of masculinity and he holds these standards in high regard. Throughout the series Tony complains repeatedly, "Whatever happened to Gary Cooper?" Gary Cooper is an American actor who Tony emulates and who embodies the "strong silent type" of man (Brown, 1995). According to Tony, contemporary (weak) men

complain about their problems, their illnesses, and their psychological dysfunctions, which creates inner conflict as Tony himself is a therapy patient. For him, this represents a feminizing of traditional masculinity. Throughout *The Sopranos*, Tony's dominant version of masculinity is contrasted with a number of different subordinate masculinities, including that of his longtime friend Arthur (Artie) Bucco.

Artie Bucco owns a restaurant, Nuovo Vesuvio, which serves as a regular lunch and dinner spot for Tony and his gang. Artie is not a member of Tony's crew, but his proximity to Tony results in a number of collisions with Tony's criminal world. In one particular plot line within "Everybody Hurts," (Imperioli, & Buscemi, 2002; season four, episode six), Nuovo Vesuvio's hostess, Elodi Colbert, introduces Artie to her brother, Jean-Philippe Colbert, so that Jean-Philippe can ask for a loan. "I told my brother that you know people who loan money," Elodi tells Artie. Jean-Philippe wants a loan for \$50,000 to help finance a business plan for the production and distribution of Armagnac, a type of brandy common to southern France. Artie agrees to help him get the \$50,000 for a fee of \$7,500. Tony loans Artie the \$50,000, who then loans it to Jean-Philippe. Artie and Jean-Philippe agree on a repayment time, which passes without Artie receiving any payment from Jean-Philippe. Artie brings his concern to Tony in the men's room of Nuovo Vesuvio.

Artie Bucco: I just wanna give you a little heads up. I know the money's due in a couple of days. Frankly, I'm a little concerned. I can't get a hold of Jean-Philippe. He doesn't return my calls.

Tony Soprano: Did you go over there?

Artie Bucco: Well...not yet.

Tony Soprano: Well, Artie, you gotta go over there. The guy's not returning your phone calls.

Artie Bucco: I know.

Tony Soprano: They miss a payment, start acting like they're doing you a favor if they give you anything. And then you gotta spend all your time hounding 'em. You gotta get your arms around this thing. Now. You know what I'm saying?

Realizing what he has to do, Artie dresses in black and rehearses his future interaction in the mirror, acting as tough as possible.

Artie Bucco: Oh, Jean-Philippe, you're home. I called you five times, qu'est-ce que c'est? Message machine broken? Nice crib. What is that, Berber carpet? Those fucking shoes you wear what are they, designer?... You fucking avoiding me, motherfucker?

Where's my money? What, are you gonna cry now? Stand up, you frog-eating faccia di cazzo, I will fuck you up, man.

Towards the end of this monologue, Artie thrusts out his fists, punching the air. After contemplating the interaction further, Artie goes to Jean-Philippe's apartment, where his plan fails. Jean-Philippe beats him and rips out his earring, which, in a previous episode, served as a symbol of Artie attempting to reinvent and construct for himself a more dominant masculinity. After his defeat, Artie tries to kill himself by overdosing on pills and Armagnac. He calls Tony, crying, and apologizes for being unable to get Jean-Philippe to repay the loan.

Artie Bucco: ...I'm a complete and total failure.

Tony Soprano: What did you do, Artie? What did you do?

Artie Bucco: I'm just going to go to sleep.

Tony Soprano: Artie, did you take something? Don't go to sleep. Artie, you hear me!
Don't go to sleep!

Tony calls 9-1-1 and an ambulance takes Artie to the hospital where they pump his stomach. That night, Tony goes to see him. Tony tells Artie that he can wipe his tab at Nuovo Vesuvio for partial payment and assures him that he will take care of the remainder of the \$50,000, meaning he will send someone more capable to extract the debt from Jean-Philippe. Artie accuses Tony of knowing this would happen all along.

Artie Bucco: You saw this whole thing, didn't you? You knew exactly what was gonna happen. You can see 20 moves down the road. Please, I don't blame you, I envy you. It's like an instinct, like a hawk sees a little mouse moving around a cornfield, from a mile up.

Tony Soprano: You think it's my fault you're fucking lying in here?

Artie Bucco: It's just that somebody mentions \$50,000 to bankroll a French digestif and your mind goes through all the permutations at like Internet speed and realizes: "Ho, worst case scenario, I eat for free."

[Tony stands up and starts yelling at Artie, who begins sobbing.]

Tony Soprano: You fucking suicide! You're disgraceful!

Artie Bucco: I'm sorry!

Tony Soprano: No. Fuck that!

Clearly, maintaining a successful usury operation requires the ability to physically intimidate and dominate other men. Artie is portrayed as unable to achieve this level of masculinity. In this scene Tony feels like he is being generous to Artie and reacts intensely when he believes that Artie is blaming him for his own failures. Again, this scene upholds the values of

personal responsibility and self-management. And, again, another man cries in front of Tony and he is sickened by this emotional, non-manly display. The ability to “man up” and face hardship without emotion is set as an ideal masculine trait for Tony, who expects this of other men. This masculine characteristic also connects to the values of neoliberal personal responsibility and self-management. Artie is not only emasculated, but is illustrated as a failing businessman and these qualities are connected. Tony’s natural ability is valued by Artie: “I don’t blame you, I envy you.”

Krager (2015) connects the birth of the “fringe economy”—economic practices that prey on the poor—to loan sharks: “Taking their cues from the illegal street economy, American entrepreneurs soon realized that money could be made by providing legal financial services to those outside the economic mainstream” (p. 76). Predatory loan practices, such as payday loans, exist because they address a real need for the poor, but if “these practices were outlawed, the poor would be forced to return to illegal loan sharks and risk serious injury if they were unable to repay their debt” (p. 80). The fictional stories in *The Sopranos*, connecting successful usury with dominant forms of masculinity, incorporate the logic of neoliberalism. The pursuit of profit supersedes mutual aid, and any acknowledgement of privilege and weakness. According to this logic, the victims of Tony Soprano’s predatory lending practices knew full well what *could* happen to them, so they are the only ones to blame. Personal responsibility outweighs their gambling addictions, and when it falls apart they are left with the hegemonic standard of “taking it like a man,” a standard that they also fail to live up to when they cry.

The Exclusion of Women

Central to the connection between masculinity and neoliberalism is the exclusion of women from the sphere of business. Tony and the other men in his crew keep their affairs secret

from their wives, who are often portrayed as unable to cope with the violent and monetary realities of life in the Di Meo crime family. The relic separation of domestic and professional spheres is upheld in *The Sopranos*.

Carmela

Similar to Tony Soprano, Carmela Soprano (Tony's wife) is a character that engenders praise for her complexity. Scholars grapple with whether to call her a feminist or a reproduction of oppressive heteronormative standards. In their essay, "What has Carmela Ever Done for Feminism?," McCabe and Akass (2006), struggle to answer this question. On the one hand, Carmela "is an embarrassment to the feminist struggle," but on the other, she "possesses a tremendous sense of agency from within the multiple institutions that seek to disenfranchise and even oppress her" (pp. 39-40). Throughout the series, Carmela continues to pressure Tony to let her have some type of financial control outside of her domestic responsibilities. One such instance occurs in "For all Debts Public and Private," (Chase & Coulter, 2002; season four, episode one).

Tony is in his kitchen, scooping ice cream into a bowl, watching *Rio Bravo*, a western movie starring Dean Martin. He sits down on the couch and Carmela approaches him and asks him to talk.

Carmela Soprano: I'm worried, Tony.

Tony Soprano: About my weight?

Carmela Soprano: About money.

Tony Soprano: You're getting a little less allowance than usual. I told you, it's temporary...

Carmela Soprano: No, it's not that. I'm worried about you, about the future, about me and the kids if something happens to you.

Tony Soprano: I don't provide for you?

...

Carmela Soprano: Who is gonna support your children and me, if God forbid, something happens to you...

Tony Soprano: You'll be taken care of... You're set in perpetuity. There's money in overseas accounts.

Carmela Soprano: I don't have the serial numbers.

...

Carmela Soprano: I am talking about some simple estate planning, Tony, that's all. My cousin, Brian Cammarata, has helped lots of people set up trusts for their kids, begin asset allocation.

Tony Soprano: I got to spell this out for you? I can't declare X amount of my income.

Carmela Soprano: Your consulting fees from Barone Sanitation you do. We file a tax return to justify the house, the cars. We could put aside some of that to start a portfolio.

Tony Soprano: Stocks? You gotta be high in the corporate structure to make that work for you. We don't have those Enron-type of connections.

Carmela Soprano: Bonds, then. There are these things called REITs Brain told me about.

Tony Soprano: Bonds, where's the capital for that?

Carmela Soprano: In the Caymans or under the mattress or wherever you put it at zero growth.

Tony Soprano: The money stays where it is with what's going on in the world today.

Carmela Soprano: There's always some excuse.

Tony Soprano: There's no cash in this house. Not since our last bust. Check the vents...and I provide for my children.

Carmela Soprano: Yes, Tony, you do. But I don't know how you do it, because you won't tell me.

Of course, it would be foolish to claim that Tony does not occasionally concede to Carmela's request for financial control throughout the show: he begrudgingly lets her donate \$50,000 to their daughter's college, Columbia University; he puts a down payment on a spec house project for Carmela; and in the above episode he finally agrees to build a stock portfolio. It would be equally foolish, however, to describe Carmela and Tony's financial relationship as equal and reciprocal, as the above dialogue illustrates. Tony providing Carmela with an "allowance" indicates an obvious separation of financial worlds. This discourse thrusts Tony into the parental role, where he must monitor Carmela's financial choices and decide on an adequate, regular amount for her depending on his income. In the scene described above, Tony expects Carmela to ask him why she's getting less allowance than usual, which is interesting given that Carmela rarely complains to Tony about the amount of money she gets. Her grievances, rather, center on a desire for fiscal control for her entire family, an ability to ensure a stable future, and at times a chance to creatively make money on her own.

A point should be made about Tony referencing Enron in the above dialogue. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2005) uses Enron to illustrate the how owners and managers are often paid in stock options (ownership titles). Because of this, "stock values rather than production then become the guiding light of economic activity" (p. 32). This became apparent with the collapse of Enron, a company that inflated its assets to increase the value of stocks

(“The Fall of Enron,” 2015), a type of fraud that would likely win Tony’s approval. Without speculating further about Tony’s opinion of Enron, in the above interaction he dismisses Carmela as ignorant and highlights “connections” as the only way to be successful in the stock market.

This notion is also confirmed in “A Hit is a Hit,” (Bosso, Renzulli, & Penn, 1999; season one, episode ten), when Carmela profits from a market tip provided by Barb Wagner, a stockbroker’s wife. Tony and Carmela are invited to the Wagners’ house for a barbeque. Also in attendance are Jeanne and Bruce Cusamano, who live next door to the Sopranos, and Jack and Wendy Kim, friends of the Wagners. The men surround the grill while the women sit at the shaded patio table. At the grill Tony tries to extract stock tips from stockbroker Randy Wagner, who is reticent and apprehensive about Tony’s inquiries. Instead, Carmela gets the tip.

Barb Wagner: American Biotics.

Jeanne Cusamano: Barb, our stock guru. She thinks American Biotics might be a good investment. It’s supposed to be close to a side effect-free anti-impotence drug.

Carmella Soprano: You guys play the stock market?

Wendy Kim: Oh, we don’t just play. We win.

Later, Carmela buys 5,000 shares of American Biotics stock over the phone. At the end of the episode Carmela reads a newspaper detailing the success of the company. Clearly, both men and women construct neoliberal discourses here, as illustrated by Wendy Kim’s line: “We win.” Yet, the curious tendency in *The Sopranos* of linking male genitalia to financial success (and patriotism in this instance) occurs again in this exchange, given that American Biotics is an anti-impotence drug. Additionally, as is true of most of Carmela’s fiscal endeavors, she buys this stock in secret and does not tell Tony about her success.

Overall, Tony remains in control of their household finances, which holds true to anachronistic standards that divide male and female labor. In “For All Debts Public and Private,” (Chase & Coulter, 2002; season four, episode one), during a session with Dr. Melfi, Tony references Carmela’s request for a stock portfolio:

Tony Soprano: Things are good, especially with Carmela. But then she starts ragging on me about the future, how she’s worried, and what’s gonna happen to them if I’m dead, and “buy bonds” and all this shit.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: A lot of people are feeling vulnerable.

Tony Soprano: But, on the other hand, she’s right. Not that I’d ever tell her that.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: Why not?

Tony Soprano: Cause then she’ll wanna know where’s the money, how much...

Again, in “Pie-o-My,” (Chase & Bronchtein, 2002, season four, episode five), Tony consults his accountant, Dov Ginsberg, about Carmela’s portfolio request.

Tony Soprano: So this estate planning shit Carmela wants, and I got nothing against getting well set up. Half of these cidrules live one day to the next.

Dov Ginsberg: The blue chip portfolio like your cousin’s suggesting, to keep pace with inflation? If it makes your wife happy, go with God.

Tony Soprano: I’m supposed to make the money, she takes care of the house. That’s the way it should be. Carmela’s a smart woman. If we start winning in the market, it’s gonna be Intel this and Coca-Cola that. It’ll never end.

In both scenes above, Tony acknowledges Carmela’s potential to make money and her perceptiveness in financial planning, but, ultimately, he characterizes Carmela as a hassle, as another problem to manage. This is emphasized throughout the series. For example, in “Moe n’

Joe” (Weiner & Shill, 2006; season six, episode ten), Tony tightens the monetary restrictions on Carmela when Meadow tries to talk to him about her relationship troubles with her live-in boyfriend. Tony claims that Meadow is “living in sin,” resulting in Meadow running to her room, upset. Later, Tony intentionally delays Carmela’s spec house project so that she can be around the house and available to console Meadow, leaving Tony free from having to deal with Meadow and her problems. Here, Tony manipulates Carmela’s financial (in)dependence for his convenience, limiting the perceived burdens posed by his daughter.

McCabe and Akass (2006) end their essay about Carmela with more questions than answers concerning the character’s feminist contributions. They write, “But women like Carmela—no feminist, slipping through the cracks of feminism, not quite making the theoretical cut...have much to tell us about our continued investment in approved heterosexual scripts” (p. 55). “In her resistance,” they argue, “she holds out the promise of change. But it is a grueling process—and one that Carmela knows only too well” (McCabe & Akass, 2006, p. 55). Like many women represented in the so-called most recent “Golden Age” of television a complete analysis of Carmela requires acknowledgements of both possibilities and limitations in her characterization, discussions that are largely beyond the scope of the present project. A central limitation that must be recognized, however, is how Carmela’s struggle for financial independence is hampered continually throughout *The Sopranos* in favor of a white male-dominated, neoliberal financial sphere.

Janice

Janice Soprano is Tony’s sister. She is the oldest of the Soprano children and perhaps the most provocative character on the series. Janice is portrayed as an entitled hippie, who, while Tony and his other sister Barbara were suffering under their mother’s abusive authority, ran off

to Seattle to pursue a party lifestyle and a career in visual art. Janice Soprano makes her first appearance in “Guy Walks into a Psychiatrists Office...” (Cahill & Coulter, 2000; season two, episode one). As Willis (2002) explains in her introduction to *The Sopranos* anthology, *This Things of Ours*, Janice shows up at Tony’s door “flaunting her postcounterculture reinvented self” (p. 3). Her initial characterization seems incidental to the storyline of *The Sopranos*, captured by Donatelli and Alward’s (2002) description in the same anthology: “Janice...first enters the series during the second season as a seemingly harmless, overweight spaced-out hippie chick who doesn’t realize that she is far too old for her clothes and lifestyle” (p. 66). Quickly, however, Janice becomes one of the most confrontational and distinctive female characters on the show.

Scholars elsewhere comment on the feminist potential of Janice. Palmer-Mehta (2006) for example, writes, “When Janice desires more direct routes to power, she appropriates the very appetites, behaviors, and tactics of her male counterparts...she forces audiences to view the behavior from a different angle of vision—from the margins” (p. 67). I concur with Palmer-Mehta on this point and develop it to illustrate how, despite Janice’s disruptive power, she is excluded from the masculine and financial world of the male characters.

The episode “Guy Walks into a Psychiatrist’s Office...,” (Cahill & Coulter, 2000; season two, episode one) provides Janice’s initial characterization. In this episode Janice has just arrived at the Soprano house from Seattle. Janice claims that she has come to New Jersey to visit and care for their abusive mother, Livia, who has been hospitalized following a stroke. Throughout the beginning of season two, Janice is characterized as manipulative and attempting to cash-in on any inheritance that would come her way after her mother dies. When Tony hears about her sister arriving at his house, he immediately suspects she has ulterior motives.

Carmela Soprano: You're not gonna believe this, your sister's here.

Tony Soprano: Barbara?

Carmela Soprano: No, Janice.

Tony Soprano: You're shitting me.

Carmela Soprano: No.

Tony Soprano: Yeah, I wonder what the scam is this time. Whatever it is, I'm gonna be five grand lighter before she rain dances back to the commune.

At the beginning of season two, Tony attempts to sell his mother's house after evidence surfaces that Livia colluded with Corrado Soprano to plan an assassination attempt against Tony. He suspects Janice has sabotaged the sale of the house by removing its "for sale" sign and trashing the house before the realtor can show it to potential buyers. After Tony finds the sign in the back of the car Janice is driving, he tells Carmela he is certain that her motives for coming to New Jersey have nothing to do with caring for their hospitalized mother.

Carmela Soprano: I am sure there's an explanation.

Tony Soprano: There is, there is...She came here for the house and a \$400 car, that was the con from the first. That's the level she works at.

The episode "Do Not Resuscitate," (Green, Burgess, Renzulli & Bruestle, 2000; season two, episode two) introduces a key tension between Tony and Janice that is maintained throughout the remainder of the series. It occurs when Janice visits Livia in the hospital after a meeting in the city.

Janice Soprano: I had to go to the city for a few days. I'm pitching my self-help video.

"Lady Kerouac," or "packing for the highway to woman's self-esteem."

Livia Soprano: You could never stand it here. You could never stand yourself and that's why you ran away.

Janice: Let's not go there today, Ma.

...

Livia: You! I know why you're here. You don't fool me for a second. You're here because you want to take my house!

Janice's various video projects are often presented as a joke, moments that attempt to elicit an eye roll from the audience. "Lady Kerouac" and "packing for the highway to woman's self-esteem" are named to point to both female empowerment and the hippie culture encapsulated in the Beat movement novels and poetry. Janice's characterization is confirmed again when she recruits Meadow to drive her to buy marijuana in this episode, which, she tells Meadow, "should be legal."

In "Do Not Resuscitate" (Green et al.; 2000 season two, episode two), Tony creates a household rule that no one can talk about his mother. Janice repeatedly breaks this rule to ask for support from Tony to help care for Livia. Tony is reluctant to provide their mother any support, financial or otherwise, as he believes that she faked her stroke. In the following scene, Tony sits with his legs submerged in his backyard pool, smoking a cigar. Janice comes to join him.

Janice Soprano: You know, Tony, I know it's not your favorite subject, but we had some really great news about Ma at the hospital today. Her rehab therapist says she's making tremendous strides and it's not going to be long before they release her.

Tony Soprano: How can she make tremendous strides when there's nothing wrong with her in the first place?

Janice Soprano: It's called face-saving therapy. The patient has to believe that they're getting better. Believe me, Medicare's not gonna pay for it if it's not as necessary as real, would they?

Tony Soprano: [shaking his head with disgust] And the taxpayer foots the bill.

Janice Soprano: It's not much longer now. But she's gonna need a place to stay.

Tony Soprano: She's out on the street.

Janice Soprano: Tony, it is her house.

Tony Soprano: Dead people don't have houses.

Janice Soprano: Daddy bought that hose.

Tony Soprano: Tell you what, take her back to Green Grove.

Janice Soprano: What, the nursing home?

Tony Soprano: It's a retirement community.

Janice Soprano: You know I don't have that kind of money.

Tony smiles, satisfied, and blows a puff of smoke into the air. Clearly, Tony knows full well that Janice cannot pay to keep her mother in the retirement community. Janice looks at him with disgust.

Janice Soprano: Fuck you.

The above scene is one of several in which Janice asks for Tony's financial support; taken as a whole, the scenes portray Janice as lazy and as reliant on her brother's wealth. For the purpose of this analysis, it is important to point out Tony's clear disapproval of taxpayer money being used to fund Medicare. Tony's position resonates with the neoliberal view of healthcare systems, which, according to McGregor (2001), "provides justification for a call for tax cuts to increase discretionary consumer spending on health care in the private markets—let consumers

make their own choices” (p. 85). In neoliberal healthcare models, the public sector must be reduced as far as possible to create a free market. “In a free market,” writes McGregor (2001), “all decisions about what to produce, how and using what resources are made by business not by government” (p. 85).

The “Do Not Resuscitate” episode (Green, et al., 2000; season two, episode two) continues to characterize Janice’s actions as manipulative. She visits her mother again in the hospital, where Livia seems to mock Janice’s ulterior motives. Livia tells a nurse—in front of Janice—that she will leave all of her money to her (the nurse) instead of to members of her own family:

Livia Soprano: No, take this one. She gets her ballet shoes, she sells them and she takes the money to Newark, and she buys amphetamines.

Nurse: She was a child then...

Livia Soprano: Well I think I’m gonna leave all my money to you, honey...

Janice Soprano: What are you talking about, money?

Livia Soprano: Janice, what’d I tell you last week? Where’d I put my money? You know, this is very important. No, I must have put it somewhere. Oh, c’mon, Settimia. No, you don’t, you don’t fool me. I know what you’re thinking about.

After Livia says the above line, Janice looks past her to a sign posted outside of a stairwell that depicts a figure using the stairs in case of a fire. As Janice watches the figure, she images the figure with Livia’s face falling down the stairs, which seems to indicate that she wants to push her mother down a staircase.

At the end of the episode, Livia calls Carmela characterizes Janice in the following way.

Livia Soprano: I just want you to know what pennies I have, I leave to the children. Your children and Barbara's children. I raised three children of my own, I did a pretty good job on two.

Carmela Soprano: They are all unhappy.

Livia Soprano: Sure, you listen to that Janice. Be very careful, because she's a real snake in the grass.

Carmela: She has no work ethic, why is that?

Janice's characterization as a countercultural hippie underscores the various accusations by Tony that her decisions are purely manipulative, borne out of financial self-interest. The message is clear throughout the entire series: Janice Soprano is a lazy, manipulative druggie, with no work ethic. This portrayal contrasts with that of Tony, who is illustrated as *earning* his money through hard work and emotional fortitude.

In a much later episode, "Moe n' Joe," (Weiner & Shill, 2006; season six, episode ten), Tony reveals his opinion of his sister to Dr. Melfi.

Tony Soprano: Janice only does acts of Janice, trust me.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: You two have never really gotten along.

Tony Soprano: Well not never, she was my older sister, I thought she was pretty cool.

And she gave it back to my mother, let me tell ya, that was some heroic shit.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: Because she defended you.

Tony Soprano: Please, huh, it was every man for himself. I remember one time my parents left her in charge...

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: Go ahead.

Tony Soprano: Well, she stood in the hallway and she tape-recorded me and Barb having a fight. And she held that cassette tape over my head for a month. Fucking extortion.

Made me make her bed and get her shit...

Later in the episode, Tony continues to talk about his feelings towards his sister with Dr. Melfi.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: Whatever your bond, what happened between then and now?

Tony Soprano: She fought it out with my mother, and finally took off, the first minute she could.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: What if you had taken off?

Tony Soprano: Well that would have never happened. Cause I wasn't like that. I did what I was told.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: Your father's son.

Tony Soprano: Yeah, that's right.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: And all that went with it.

Tony Soprano: That's right, the success and the money.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi: But, beyond that, what else did you inherit?

Tony Soprano: I tell you what I inherited: my mother. Janice got laid, she took off, she laughed at all this shit. Then the trip's over and she's back and she's one of us and she wants a piece. Well let me tell you: she gets nothing! Cause I got the scars!

The above scenes in "Moe n' Joe" (Weiner & Shill, 2006) demonstrate how Janice is excluded from her brother's masculine financial sphere. The paradox, however, is that Janice is a disruptive force in the story, a person who reflects the behavior of her male counterparts (Palmer-Mehta, 2006), specifically her brother. Janice manipulates, extorts, plays people against each other, seeks out money in the pursuit of self-interest, and yet, to quote Carmela, "has no

work ethic.” By contrast, Tony, the patriarch of the family, has worked hard and suffered for his money, even though Tony uses the same methods of extortion and manipulation to support his expensive lifestyle.

Devin

Devin Pillsbury is a minor character in *The Sopranos*. She is the girlfriend of Tony and Carmela’s son, Anthony Jr. (usually called “AJ”), in “Everybody Hurts” (Imperioli, & Buscemi, 2002; season four, episode six). AJ’s storyline in this episode centers on his criminal family’s fascination for his group of friends, including Devin, who finds AJ’s connection to the mob not only intriguing but also sexually attractive.

In one scene in the episode, Devin and AJ are kissing on the couch when Carmela gets home. They both jump up to avoid being caught. AJ introduces Devin to Carmela as his girlfriend. AJ places a can of Coke on an end table next to the couch and almost knocks a small statue off the table. Carmela says to be careful of her “Lladró,” and then brags about its price: “I don’t even wanna say how much it costs...3,000 dollars.”

Devin tells AJ that she really wants to be alone with him. In response, AJ devises a plan for them to use Meadow’s dorm room at Columbia for privacy. Before they leave, Devin demonstrates her attraction to AJ’s criminal connections:

Devin Pillsbury: I pictured your house different. I thought it’d be like Don Corleone’s compound with gate, wall, big old Cadillacs. Isn’t that stupid?

AJ Soprano: Our place in Tahoe looks exactly like Michael’s in [Godfather] Two.

Devin Pillsbury: Wow, really?

AJ Soprano: No...we don’t have a place in Tahoe. We have a boat though.

Devin Pillsbury: I’m like a gangster dude’s girlfriend.

After the last line, she pulls AJ close to her and kisses him. They travel to the city to see Meadow, who refuses to let them use her dorm room for sex. On their way back to New Jersey, AJ and Devin talk about the poverty they see in the South Bronx borough of New York.

Devin Pillsbury: Look at the way these people have to live.

AJ Soprano: Yeah...

Devin Pillsbury: I think they're overwhelmed. I mean, they're in a cycle, they keep having kids...

AJ Soprano: I know.

Devin Pillsbury: We're just so insulated from reality. I mean, we have everything we want.

AJ Soprano: When you think about it.

Devin Pillsbury: They're on food stamps and welfare.

AJ Soprano: And my mom could go out and buy a statue for 3,000 dollars. *3000 dollars*. We have a housekeeper three days a week.

Devin Pillsbury: We have one too.

AJ Soprano: I guess I just lucked out to be rich and live in a big house.

Devin Pillsbury: Yeah...

The above scene has the potential for both Devin and AJ to reach a critical position about systemic poverty under American capitalism. Devin does acknowledge that these people are in “a cycle,” which seems to suggest that the poor are not *completely* responsible for their social position. However, the connection to this “cycle” and “having kids” speaks to Reagan’s narrative of the “welfare queen” (Peck, 2011). According to Smith (2008), “the welfare mother has been effectively constructed as a pariah in official discourse over decades, even centuries, of

American and English history” (p. 136), so much so in her view that it is nearly impossible to imagine how to undo its unconscious cultural associations. Portrayed as lazy, promiscuous, excessively fertile, unruly, of color, and even criminal, the trope of the welfare queen masks the structural origins of poverty (Collins, 2005; Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014). The cultural discourse of the welfare queen *feminizes* poverty and traps marginalized mothers in a system that upholds self-management while limiting paternal resource under neoliberal governance (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014). The logic that both AJ and Devin “lucked out” to be rich avoids any wider structural understanding of why poverty happens in capitalist societies.

Later in the episode, AJ visits Devin’s house for the first time. It turns out that Devin’s family is astronomically wealthy, much more than AJ’s family. This immediately makes AJ uncomfortable. Devin, AJ, and their mutual friend Patrick eat lunch in Devin’s living room where AJ awkwardly marvels at the paintings on the wall.

AJ Soprano: So this is, like a real Picasso?

Devin Pillsbury: My dad collects his later stuff.

AJ Soprano: They’re all cocks...

Yet again, this scene connects wealth and financial success with male genitalia, a connection that is emphasized by AJ’s clear discomfort with Devin’s wealth compared to his own. Devin notices that AJ is not eating his food.

Devin Pillsbury: You don’t like that? Do you want something else?

AJ Soprano: No, just...I wish you would have said something.

Devin Pillsbury: It doesn’t mean anything.

AJ Soprano: I feel so stupid. My mother’s stupid Lladró and we have a housekeeper three days a week?

Devin Pillsbury: I don't care, I like *you*.

...

AJ Soprano: You should've told me.

Devin Pillsbury: And what would you have done if I did?

AJ Soprano: I don't know...I mean, if it wasn't such a big deal, why didn't you say something.

Devin's family's immense wealth clearly emasculates AJ, who unreasonably claims that Devin should have told him about the disparity. The final scene of the episode emphasizes AJ's family's wealth as a measure of his own masculinity. AJ and his friends are hanging out, talking about Devin's enormous house.

Patrick Whalen: The projection screen in their media room was as big as the small ones at AMC.

Jason Malatesta: I head Mr. Pillsbury is some kind of financial corporate wiz or something.

Matt Testa [to AJ]: Dude, you're the Pillsbury dough-boy.

AJ Soprano: Shut up.

Patrick Whalen: Hey, AJ, how come your dad doesn't have that Don Corleone money?

AJ Soprano: I don't know.

In the realm of these male friends, AJ's wealth is directly connected with his masculinity, as well as his father's. Devin's father, Mr. Pillsbury, is upheld in this episode as the hegemonic standard for these boys. The enormous house, decorated with Picasso's phallic paintings, enforces a type of ascendancy that emasculates AJ. Furthermore, Devin is largely excluded from these messages, aside from AJ blaming her for not preparing him for a confrontation with Mr.

Pillsbury's superior money/masculinity. That is, Devin is punished for failing to see that AJ would be threatened by her father's wealth in comparison to that of his own father.

Skepticism about Social Programs and Social Movements

Reverend James Jr. and Tony

In season two, Tony Soprano assumes control of the North Jersey Di Meo crime family after the FBI imprisons Corrado Soprano, who until that point had been the boss. Each member of the Di Meo family specializes in different areas of crime; for example, some focus on illegal sports betting while others commit stock scams. One of the areas Corrado Soprano specialized in was a joint-fitters labor union. In "Do Not Resuscitate" (Green et al., 2000; season two, episode two), Tony uses his connection to Corrado to extort money from a man named Jack Masserone, the head of the North Jersey joint-fitters union. On the surface, this scam seems just like any other on *The Sopranos*, but a closer look reveals neoliberal discourse concerning gender and race.

The episode opens at the Masserone Construction site, where a group of black men have gathered to protest the lack of jobs for black joint-fitters. Reverend James Jr. heads the protest, loudspeaker in hand, standing on the back of a pick-up truck.

Reverend James Jr.: The black man industrialized the north but we're still fighting for jobs. Over 25 joint-fitters on the work site, not a black man to be found.

Protestors: Tell 'em, Reverend. Why?

Reverend James Jr.: I'll tell you why!

Protestors: Tell us!

Reverend James Jr.: Black joint-fitters, like all black artisans, have been shut out of the union.

[The protesters cheer]

Reverend James Jr.: Out of work while their white joint-fitter is filling his stomach. My father put his life on the line for this country. Come on up here, Papa. Somebody help my Papa on up here.

[His father, Reverend James Sr., climbs on the back of the pick-up truck]

Reverend James Jr.: This is my Pop! Fought in World War II, the war against tyranny, came home to establish his own tabernacle. But when he came home, I said when he came home, he had to fight a different kind of war all over again. Talk to them, Papa. Talk to the people, Papa.

Reverend James Sr.: Since then we have spilled our blood in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. Every time I say, sweet Jesus, let 'em do right by our boys when they get back here. But somebody forgot to tell the man. Now, you know what I'm talking about.

Protestors: Tell 'em reverend!

Reverend James Sr.: Yes, oh yes, I'mma tell 'em. I'mma tell 'em no more cutting us out. No more!

Protestors: No more!

Reverend James Sr.: No more!

Protestors: No more!

Reverend James Sr.: You hear that, Mr. Masserone Brothers' Construction? No more!

Reverend James Jr.: Somebody tell me what we want!

Protestors: Jobs!

Reverend James Jr.: When do we want 'em?

Protestors: Now!

At first, this story line illustrates a legitimate social problem: the relative lack of jobs for minority workers. In *Race and the Invisible Hand*, a book that explores how white labor networks exploit black workers, Royster (2003) argues that “continuing patterns of opportunity-hoarding among whites have exacerbated exploitative political and economic conditions that harm blacks” (p. 36). The neoliberal logic of the market’s “invisible hand” obscures true conditions of racial inequality in the labor market. Royster (2003) writes, “the presumed workings of ‘the invisible hand’ subverts an examination of the observed workings of visible hands, with the result that even mild inclusive policies, such as affirmative action, are seen as disrupting purportedly fair sorting processes” (p. 36). Alone, a story of black protestors fighting against managers and owners that have privileged whites could perhaps make this social problem accessible for viewers. As the *Sopranos* episode continues, however, it is revealed that Tony Soprano colluded with Reverend James Jr. in a scam to extort money from Jack Masserone. The protestors at Masserone’s construction site successfully disrupt the construction operations, leading to Jack Masserone asking Tony Soprano to enlist people from his crime family to physically beat and threaten the protestors. Tony agrees, but tells Jack, “It’s gonna cost you.”

At the next protest, members of Tony’s crew, armed with bats, chains, wrenches, and crowbars, confront the black men outside the construction site. The two groups clash and start to fight. This violent scene of black men versus white men is shot in a series of close-ups. One white male chokes a black protester with a large chain; another hits a black man with a crowbar until he loses his breath. As the violence continues, Jack Masserone watches for a moment, then retreats into his office.

At the end of the episode, Tony meets with Reverend James Jr. to pay him for the planned protest. He gives him an envelope of cash.

Tony Soprano: This is your end of the demonstration bust-up.

Reverend James Jr.: Your guys went a little too far. Rasheen Taylor almost lost an eye.

Reverend James Jr. tries to broker a deal with Tony for more money from the scam because he lied to his protestors.

Reverend James Jr.: Hey man, all your guys are in on this shit. These protestors find out I'm lining my pockets with their blood, it's me they're crying for.

Whenever a workers' union is referenced in *The Sopranos*, it is in connection to organized crime, as is the case in the above scene. Tony Soprano and Reverend James Jr.'s plan to engineer a protest to extort money from Jack Masserone does little to advance social justice aims of creating more jobs for minority workers. The narrative instead promotes skepticism about organized labor and race relations. Union corruption and self-interest eclipse the idea that protesting for a legitimate political grievance is a functional and worthy pursuit. Furthermore, the collusion between Tony Soprano and Reverend James Jr. emphasizes the postracial and neoliberal message that ending racial inequality is less important than pursuing profits by any means necessary.

How does masculinity figure into this analysis? Of course, this scam was planned and performed solely by men. As usual, Tony hid this ploy from his wife and daughter. Like much of the criminal activity on *The Sopranos*, the planned protests existed in the secret world of the amoral male characters. Men on *The Sopranos* possess a unique ability to transgress moral lines in the pursuit of financial gain. Women, like Carmela and Meadow, are consistently illustrated as unable to make the "hard decisions" that Tony and his crew so often make. Furthermore, male violence is the centerpiece of the planned protest scam. Here, problems are solved by male violence, an enduring notion that is deeply integrated into hegemonic masculinity.

The HUD Scam

Another telling example that emphasizes skepticism about social justice in *The Sopranos* occurs in “Watching Too Much Television” (Chase & Patterson, 2002; season four, episode seven). In the episode, financial advisor Brian Cammarata, who is also Carmela’s cousin, tells Tony about a public housing scam he once heard about. The following exchange occurs at a local diner over a breakfast the two have with Ralph Cifaretto, another captain in the Di Meo crime family central to the narrative of season four:

Brain Cammarata: ...some guy I went to school with, this black guy, we worked one summer for this not-for-profit housing group. Told me about some scam his minister was involved with up in Harlem.

Tony Soprano: I read about this. Fugazy Mortgage Loans or something, right?

Brain Cammarata: Actually you ever hear of HUD?

Tony Soprano: Housing development, yeah.

Brain Cammarata: HUD was set up in part to help minorities and low-income families become homeowners.

Ralph Cifaretto: There are more programs for these deadbeats, I swear to Christ.

Brain Cammarata: As long as the feds guarantee the home mortgage, the banks figure: what the hell? They’ll loan the money. You get a front man to buy houses in some crummy neighborhood. Talking about some real shitboxes. Maybe they’re worth 100 grand apiece. Next you tie up with some non-profit organization who goes to HUD, says they intend to buy these houses from your stooge. They’re gonna convert them to homes for working class blacks, blah, blah, blah. This is it though...

The scene cuts out before Brian finishes describing the scam. The entire episode centers on Tony attempting to perform the housing scam Brian describes in the scene. First, Tony and Ralph meet with their political connection, Assemblyman Ronald Zellman, and the head of HUD, Maurice Tiffen, in a steam room to discuss the viability of such a scam. We learn in this episode that Ronald Zellman and Maurice Tiffen were social justice activists at the beginning of their political careers. Ralph asks Maurice in the steam room about HUD.

Ralph Cifaretto: So this group you got now, the Urban Housing League. What's the story there?

Maurice Tiffen: Like many non-profits we have fallen on hard times. Republican administration, plus a proliferation of new charities post 9/11.

Ralph then describes the plan to Maurice.

Ralph Cifaretto: Okay, we got a guy, Dr. Fried, he's a urologist. We're gonna give him a half-mill of our money. Have him grab up these four houses on Garside Street for 125 grand apiece... Once we own the houses, we got an appraiser who'll play ball, he's gonna reappraise them in the 300,000 dollar range. What you do, Maurice, is take the phony appraisals to HUD. Tell them your urban housing wants to buy up these shitholes, convert them to low-cost housing for working families. Once HUD guarantees the mortgage app, you take it to the bank. They cut a check, and we work it up nice.

Maurice Tiffen: At which point I assume my organization fails to make the mortgage payment.

Ronald Zellman: Unforeseen construction delays and repeated vandalism force the project into dissolution. We all walk away from the houses.

Ralph Cifaretto: Your cut will be in the ten percent of the profit range.

Ronald Zellman: My office will write a letter in strong support of your application.

Maurice Tiffen: Sounds about right.

The men perform the scam successfully. Not only do they successfully defraud the federal government, they also intend to strip the houses of any valuable construction material. Tony specifically plans to sell to copper piping from the house. However, a group of drug addicts squatting in the house complicates the operation for Tony. To complete the scam, Tony needs the squatters gone. Ronald Zellman convinces Maurice to pay off a group of young black kids, who Maurice finds through his connection to a youth gang outreach program, to terrorize the black drug addicts in the house. The kids go to the house with guns and shoot the walls and threaten the drug addicts, who run from the house, injured or shot.

After Tony can get “maximum value” from the scam by selling these construction materials, Ronald and Maurice receive their cut of the scam at the Bada Bing! strip club. Tony’s associates Silvio Dante and Ralph Cifaretto pay them.

Silvio Dante: Here you go, ten percent apiece. Technically, it’s a little less but our friend rounded you to an even \$60,000.

Ralph Cifaretto: There’s plenty more where that came from. A lot of poor families need affordable housing in Newark.

As Ronald and Maurice leave, they talk briefly about how much has changed since their activist days.

Ronald Zellman: You ever feel bad about any of this?

Maurice Tiffen: What do you mean?

Ronald Zellman: When I think about where we started out...

Maurice: [chuckling] I used to think that what I did made a difference. The anti-drug programs, the voter drives, but over the years, it's like shoveling shit against the tide, you know that.

Ronald Zellman: I guess.

Maurice Tiffen: Yeah, you...you cut corners, but you help out, do the best you can. Hey, if it ain't us, it's going to be somebody else. Really, I mean what are we supposed to be, the only honest men?

Ronald Zellman: We were going to lead a revolution, Maurice.

Maurice Tiffen: [laughing] Revolution? The revolution got sold, Ronnie.

Again, the above dialogue communicates the characters' cynicism about working to achieve social justice. Ralph Cifaretto's comment earlier about the amount of programs "for these deadbeats" demonstrates this cynicism. One of the central narratives in neoliberalism, emphasized by Ronald Regan, is that "hard-working Americans were being victimized by a voracious government that took their money, handed it over to undeserving social groups, and undermined the work ethic by punishing the diligent and rewarding the lazy" (Peck, 2011, p. 260). Taking the episode as a whole, this story communicates that social programs and social justice are futile against the "the tide" of neoliberalism. Government intervention to address the wealth disparity is corrupt and mocked by those (mostly white men) who have the most privilege. The final scene shows Tony, Silvio, and Ralph raising a toast of champagne to the federal government.

Tony Soprano: Well, here's something I never thought I'd say: to the federal government!

[They raise their glasses]

Silvio Dante: Depends on which department.

[They laugh and drink]

The cynicism present in the previous episodes reinforces depoliticized sentiments held by many in America. These stories approach organized labor, government programs, racial inequality, and social justice with overwhelming skepticism that privileges neoliberal logic or resignedly accepts such logic as being dominant and unbeatable. Additionally, the previous episodes demonstrate how male violence is used to solve problems that stand in the way of profit making. Again, the collusion between Maurice Tiffen (black), Assemblyman Ronald Zellman (white), and Tony (white) emphasizes a postracial and neoliberal message that obscures the realities of race in relation to wealth disparities and privilege. In the present socioeconomic contexts, no statement illustrates the skepticism of progressive social justice change more clearly than Maurice Tiffen's conclusion: "Revolution? The revolution got sold, Ronnie."

Chapter Summary

This chapter described discourses of masculinity and neoliberalism in *The Sopranos* in three categories: (1) usury and masculinity; (2) the exclusions of women; and, (3) skepticism about social programs and social movements. The following chapter explores neoliberal discourses presented in *Breaking Bad*.

CHAPTER FIVE:

BREAKING BAD

This chapter addresses the discourses of masculinity and neoliberalism present in *Breaking Bad*. The chapter is divided into four sections. First, I investigate the relationship between entrepreneurialism and masculinity in the series. Second, I describe the notion of “providing” for one’s family within neoliberalism. Third, I discuss the technical and scientific solutions to problems presented in the narrative as they relate to masculinity and neoliberalism. Finally, this chapter explores moments of incorporation where the dominant ideology of neoliberalism incorporates feminine and alternative masculine characteristics.

Breaking Bad centers on Walter White, who, in the midst of financial struggle, learns he has inoperable lung cancer. In desperation, he enlists a former student to help him produce and sell methamphetamine to pay for his mounting medical costs and to support his family posthumously. The series follows Walter as he changes into a calculating, violent criminal, as well as a wildly successful (criminal) entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurialism

One of the central goals of neoliberal economics is creating and encouraging entrepreneurial initiatives (Harvey, 2005). Connell (2010) argues that the cherished figure of neoliberalism is “the entrepreneur,” who is culturally coded as masculine. Dominant masculinity and entrepreneurialism share a number of cultural associations such as risk, success, materialism, and power. This cultural coding can be partially attributed to popular media that naturalizes images of the business world as a masculine space. *Breaking Bad* emphasizes these types of cultural connections between masculinity and entrepreneurialism.

Pierson (2013b) argues that Walter White exhibits neoliberal principles throughout *Breaking Bad*. He writes, “Walt exemplifies the tenets of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. He carefully weighs the risks and benefits of his strategic business actions...Walt’s primary concern is maximizing his profits and protecting them from the prying eyes of government officials” (p. 24). Though Pierson’s observations are crucial for understanding how *Breaking Bad* makes neoliberal ideas accessible in popular media texts, his chapter does not go into detail about the connections between masculinity and neoliberalism in the series. This section provides important extensions of Pierson’s observations. Understanding the gendered quality of neoliberalism communicated on *Breaking Bad* illustrates the ways neoliberal economics permeate social discourses through popular media.

Violence and Business

Throughout *Breaking Bad*, key points along Walter’s trajectory as a character demonstrate the connections between masculinity and neoliberalism, specifically as they concern entrepreneurialism. At first, Walter’s goal is simply to make as much money as possible from the meth he produces to support his family and pay for his mounting medical bills. Initially, he has no intention of launching a business, committing violence, or becoming a major player in the meth industry in Albuquerque. That is, he does not intentionally set out to become an entrepreneur, or see himself in such terms. He just wants to make money and fast. In “Cat’s in the Bag” (Gilligan & Bernstein, 2008; season 1, episode 2), Jesse and Walter discuss how to deal with a man they have captive in Jesse’s basement. This man, Krazy-8, threatened Jesse and Walter and tried to get Walter to teach him his meth recipe so he could use it for his own monetary gain. Walter, however, was able to poison him and his associate, Emilio. Emilio did not survive, but Krazy-8 did. Thus, Jesse and Walter must decide what to do with Krazy-8.

Walter's initial idea is to negotiate with him. He asks Jesse about Krazy-8's potential to listen to reason.

Walter White: The one downstairs, tell me about him. Come on, anything, something.

Start with his name, at least!

Jesse Pinkman: Krazy-8.

...

Walter White: So...you work with him regularly?

Jesse Pinkman: No, not him so much. His cousin, mainly.

Walter White: Who's his cousin?

Jesse Pinkman: The guy out in the RV!

Walter White: Alright, alright.

Jesse Pinkman: Krazy-8's one level higher.

Walter White: One level higher?

Jesse Pinkman: Yeah, you know, not like street level. Higher. You know, there's like a Starbucks at every corner. Krazy-8 is like the dude that sells Starbucks his beans.

Walter White: Okay, so he's a distributor. Okay, so, is he...is...in other words, what is his reputation for violence?

Jesse Pinkman: Well, um, he did try to kill us both yesterday, so there's that.

Walter White: What I'm trying to say is that he's a distributor, right? He's a...He's a businessman, he's a *man of business*. It would therefore seem to follow that he is capable of acting out of mutual self-interest, yes?

Jesse Pinkman: What?

Walter White: Do you think he is capable of listening to reason?

Jesse Pinkman: What, what kind of reason? You mean like, dear Krazy-8, listen, if I let you go, will you promise not to come back and waste my entire family? No Colombian neckties? You mean that kind of reason? Nah man, I can't say as I have high fucking hopes where that's concerned.

To Walter in season one, violence is not a part of doing business. Businessmen listen to reason, Walter believes, and therefore they favor the use of reason over the use of force. Jesse's knowledge clues Walter in to the harsh realities of this world of crime. Still, Walter is reluctant to kill Krazy-8. He grapples over what to do and makes the following pros/cons list:

Let him live	Kill him
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It's the moral thing to do -Judeo/Christian principles -You are <u>NOT</u> a murderer -Sanctity of life -Post-traumatic stress -You won't be able to live with yourself -Murder is wrong! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -He'll kill your entire family if you let him go.

Despite Walter's reasoning he still cannot bring himself to kill Krazy-8. In fact, Krazy-8 almost convinces Walter to let him go. But before Walter frees him, he realizes that Krazy-8 is hiding a sharp piece of a broken plate, which presumably he would use to stab Walter as soon as he is freed. With this understanding, Walter finally decides to murder Krazy-8. This decision begins the connection between violence and entrepreneurialism that becomes central to the criminal world of *Breaking Bad*.

The above pro/con lists speaks to a level of self-responsibility under neoliberalism. Walter's responsibility as the head of his household is to protect himself and his family, which prioritizes one more choice (family protection, with murder as the price he must pay to achieve

that moral goal) over another. Neoliberalism produces “self-governing” individuals, shifting the responsibility for social risks like illness and crime to the domain of self-care (Lemke 2001; Pierson, 2013b). Before Walter kills Krazy-8, he gives him water, feeds him, and even connects with him through conversation. But these acts of compassion never mitigate the reality of two men pitted against each other, borne out of entrepreneurial criminal conflict. Pierson (2013b) writes, the “criminal market with its constantly changing market territories and wealth, its winner-take-all ethos, and unwanted government intrusion... represents the brutalities best associated with the global, neoliberal marketplace” (p. 24). The harsh realities of this new world of crime start to change Walter. He quickly begins to epitomize a dominant white male and a dominant businessman, simultaneously.

The division of labor in Walter and Jesse’s business at the beginning of season one has Walter in charge of production and Jesse in charge of distribution. In the beginning, Jesse attempts to sell the meth himself, illustrated in a montage in “Crazy Handful of Nothing” (Mastras & Hughes, 2008; season one, episode six). After Jesse’s first night of selling, he meets Walter in the desert to start cooking another batch of meth. Walter is waiting for Jesse, sitting in the doorway of the RV.

Walter White: We were supposed to start at three.

Jesse Pinkman: Hey, I’m out there making fat stacks man, chill.

[Jesse hands Walter a cell phone and a handful of cash.]

Jesse Pinkman: Hey, prepaid cell phone, use it.

Walter White: How much is this?

Jesse Pinkman: 26 big ones.

Walter White: Is that all? 26 thousand?

Jesse Pinkman: Uh, no, that's 26 hundred, and your share is 13, minus 25 bucks for the phone.

Walter White: How much meth did you sell?

Jesse Pinkman: Nearly an ounce.

Walter White: Last time I checked, there were 16 ounces to a pound. What did you do with the rest? Smoke it?

Jesse Pinkman: Yo, I've been out there all night slinging crystal. You think it's cake moving a pound of meth one tenth at a time?

Walter White: So, why are you selling it in such small quantities? What don't you just sell the whole pound at once?

Jesse Pinkman: To who? What do I look like, Scarface?

Walter White [emphatically]: This is unacceptable. I'm breaking the law here. This return is too little for the risk. I thought you'd be ready for another pound today.

Jesse Pinkman: You may know a lot about chemistry, man, but you don't know jack about slinging dope.

Walter White: Well, I'll tell you I know a lack of motivation when I see it.

Jesse Pinkman: Oh my god...

Walter White: Come on, you, you, you've got to be more imaginative, you know? Just, just think outside the box here. We have to move our product in bulk, wholesale now.

How do we do that?

Jesse Pinkman: What do you mean to like a distributor?

Walter White: Yes! Yes, that's what we need. We need a distributor now. Do you know anyone like that?

Jesse Pinkman: Yeah, I mean I used to...until you killed him.

Walter White: So who took Krazy-8's place?

Jesse Pinkman: Some guy named Tuco. Badass, from what I hear.

Walter White: Tuco, okay. So then just go talk to Tuco.

Jesse Pinkman [mockingly]: Right. Like, "Hello, sir. Hey, I know you don't know me, but would you be interested in a felony quantity of methamphetamine?"

Walter White: Well, yes, but maybe with a little more...salesmanship, perhaps?

Jesse Pinkman: You just don't get it, man. This guy's O.G.

Walter White: What does that mean?

Jesse Pinkman: Jesus, look, he's upper-level, man. He's not going to do business with some dude he doesn't know. Kay, you don't understand the way it works. You can't just bum rush some high-level iceman and start cutting deals, kay? It's risky. You need an intro, you need someone to vouch.

...

Jesse Pinkman: Look, I'm telling you, Mr. White, it's too risky. Okay? I mean, mean we're making money, why can't you just be satisfied with the way it is?

Walter White [yelling]: Ah come on! Jesus! Just grow some fucking balls!

A crucial part of the above exchange occurs when the small amount of money Jesse makes shocks Walter, who denigrates Jesse's entrepreneurial potential as well as his masculinity in the same conversation, thereby linking these two ideas. In the exchange, Walter attributes Jesse's selling performance to a lack of motivation and creative thinking. To Walter, walking the streets and selling small amounts of meth is a poor business strategy, indicative of Jesse's incompetence. Walter then attributes Jesse's apprehensiveness to negotiate with a distributor to a

lack of masculinity; if Jesse would just grow some balls, he might be able start accumulating entrepreneurial acumen (and greater revenues).

Jesse's masculinity is denigrated further when he tries to confront Tuco, who beats him mercilessly. While Jesse recovers in the hospital from this beating, Walter decides he will confront Tuco himself ("Crazy Handful of Nothing," Mastras & Hughes, 2008; season one, episode six). Before he does, though, he shaves his head. At this point in the story Walter has begun chemotherapy treatments for his lung cancer, and as a result his hair has started to fall out. At first, Walter's shaven head seems like a natural outcome of his cancer treatment, but it is defined immediately as a symbol of masculinity. After Walter shaves his head, he walks out to meet his family at the table for breakfast. Skyler covers her mouth in shock, while her son smiles, nods, and says, "Badass, Dad," the same description Jesse used for Tuco. Later, Walter confronts Tuco, leading to a partnership between the two men. The way Walter earns Tuco's respect is by setting off an explosion in his office, using fulminated mercury. Through this violent demonstration, Walter threatens to kill Tuco and Tuco agrees to start buying Walter and Jesse's meth in bulk.

In a subsequent episode, "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal" (Gould & Hunter, 2008; season one, episode seven), Walter and Jesse wait to meet Tuco for their first drug deal after their respective encounters with this man. When Jesse sees Tuco's SUV driving towards them, he puts his hands over his head and grits his teeth, suggesting he's anxious about seeing Tuco again. Walter notices.

Walter White: Look, you don't have to be here for this. Okay, I mean seriously, I'm okay.

Jesse Pinkman: Nah, I'm no pussy. I'm good.

Being willing to engage in a high-risk meeting is coded as a not feminine quality: “I’m no pussy.” Tuco gets out of his SUV and greets the men. He then apologizes to Jesse for the beating.

Tuco Salamanca: I’m sorry that I had to tune you up. Respect, ese. You gotta give it to get it.

Here, Tuco conflates violence with respect. Walter’s ability to threaten Tuco with the explosion in his office earned Walter respect from him, as well as an entrepreneurial partnership with him.

Violent Reputations and Expansion

In season two, Walter and Jesse are no longer working with Tuco, as they are attempting to create their own distribution infrastructure. Jesse has his three friends, Skinny Pete, Badger, and Combo, selling their meth. At first Walter agrees to stay out of the distribution side of the business, but he is critical of Jesse’s management ability. In “Breakage” (Walley-Beckett & Renck, 2009; season two, episode five), Walter meets Jesse in the desert to get his percentage of their sales. Jesse throws him a bag.

Jesse Pinkman: Your half, 15K. That’s what I’m talking about.

[Walter counts the money any looks dissatisfied.]

Jesse Pinkman: You’re welcome. Jesus.

Walter White: Help me understand the math, okay? I gave you one pound, correct? You and I split \$2,000 per ounce. \$1,000 each, one pound, that’s 16 ounces. 16 ounces should net to me \$16,000. 16, not 15.

Jesse Pinkman: Something came up.

Walter White: Something came up?

Jesse Pinkman: One of my guys got held up by a couple junkies. Lost an ounce, but it's cool. Skinny Pete's cool.

Walter White: Ohhh, so you're saying that your guy got robbed? Or, rather, you got robbed, but it doesn't matter.

Jesse Pinkman: Dude, it's called "breakage," okay? Like K-Mart. Shit breaks.

Walter White: And you're thinking this is acceptable?

Jesse Pinkman: It's the cost of business, yo. You're sweating me over a grand?

Walter White [mockingly]: Hey, look I'm just the chemist, here. I'm not the street guy, yo. But it seems to me that what you call "breakage" is just you making a fool of yourself. I've got another technical term for you: "Non-sustainable business model."

Jesse Pinkman: You're focusing on the negative. Six grand a day we're making. What's your problem?

Walter White: What happens when word gets out, and it's open season on these clowns you've hired? Once everyone knows that Jesse Pinkman, drug lord, can be robbed with impunity?

Jesse Pinkman: Man, come on?

Walter White: You think Tuco had breakage? I guess it's true, he did. He broke bones, He broke the skull of anybody who tried to rip him off.

...

Jesse Pinkman: Yo...I mean seriously, what the hell do you want me to do?

Walter's approach to the business and to his role have clearly shifted; he now argues that to have a sustainable business model he and Jesse must violently intimidate people so others will not rob them. This requires the exercise of dominant masculinity as a form of protection. Here,

Walter holds up Tuco as the example that he and Jesse should emulate in their own burgeoning business. Walter emphasizes this when he goes to Jesse's house later that evening. He walks in and speaks to Jesse with stern stoicism.

Walter White: You asked me what I want you to do.

[Walter puts a gun on the counter and looks up at Jesse.]

Walter White: I want you to handle it.

The connection between violence, masculinity, and entrepreneurialism continues in this storyline in "Negro y Azul" (Shiban & Alaciá, 2009; season two, episode seven). At this point in the story, Jesse attempts to "handle it," as Walter suggested. He finds the two drug addicts who ripped off Skinny Pete and confronts them. The situation turns from bad to worse (to ludicrous), resulting in one of the drug addicts killing the other by purposely squashing his head with an ATM. After this, however, a rumor develops that it was Jesse who killed the drug addict. The following exchange emphasizes how violence and intimidation are necessary to Walter and Jesse's business. Walter meets with Skinny Pete, Badger, and Combo to receive payment from them when they ask him about the rumor.

Skinny Pete: Hey, uh, hey, it's all there man, every dollar. In case you want to like, count it.

Walter White: Here?

Skinny Pete: I'm just saying...

Combo: ...just saying, like, we cool, yo. We ain't got no confusion and interpretation as to who we work for.

Walter White: What have you heard?

Badger: Did Jesse really, uh, I mean, uh, did he really...squash that dude's head with an ATM machine?

Walter White: Who's saying that?

Skinny Pete: Damn, man, it's all over town. Everybody's like, whoa, snap! Usually I got to chase dudes down for their money, but today, everyone's paying up.

Combo: True that. Serious.

Badger: But, like, uh, he really did it?

Walter White: You didn't hear that from me.

Walter sees this as an opportunity to expand business. He goes to Jesse's house and unrolls a map of the city of Albuquerque on his counter. He points to different places on the map while he emphatically talks about expansion.

Walter White: Alright, now, this is our territory, right? Currently.

Walter White [snapping at Jesse's face to get his attention]: Hey, Hello?

Jesse Pinkman: Yeah, man, correct.

Walter White: Alright, then. Now look at this [pointing]: here, here, here, and here. What does that look like to you, hmmm? Opportunities. Golden ones! That's what that looks like. No, look, look, it's an entire city full of buyers. Now, why aren't we exploiting that?

Jesse Pinkman: Cause it's not our territory.

Walter White: Because we lack initiative.

Jesse Pinkman: Initiative?

Walter White: Yes.

Jesse Pinkman: Ahhh...

Walter White: You need to employ more dealers, double, triple your crew. Those three I met, they should each have three, six, nine sub-dealers working for them; exponential growth—that's the key.

Jesse Pinkman: It's not our territory! Man, yo, you follow me here? We go rolling into these neighborhoods, other crews ain't going to take kindly. You understand?

Walter White: Sure. They won't like it. But I say they're not going to do a thing about it. No listen, Jesse, Jesse, the game has changed. The word is out. And you are a killer.

Jesse Pinkman: What are you talking about?

Walter White: Apparently, it's all over town. Somebody crossed you, you got angry, you crushed their skull with an ATM machine.

Jesse Pinkman: But that's not how it happened.

Walter White: Who cares? Just as long as it's our competitors who believe it and not the police.

The brutal violence Jesse witnessed when he confronted the two drug addicts is largely trivial to Walter. Rather, *this is a good thing for them*. The power garnered from a violent reputation allows them to expand their business. Here, Walter is no longer frightened or morally opposed to violent outcomes; instead, he embraces the opportunity for Jesse to take credit for a killing if it is good for business. Eventually, Jesse agrees, as demonstrated by the last few scenes of this episode. Jesse meets Skinny Pete, Badger, and Combo to discuss the plans for expansion.

Jesse Pinkman: The game has changed, yo. This is our city. Alright? All of it. The whole damn place. Our territory. We're staking our claim. We sell when we want, where we want. We're going to be kings. Understand? Well, I'm going to be king and you guys will be princes or dukes or something.

Badger: I want to be a knight.

Jesse Pinkman: But, first things first. We go to get more dealers. Foot soldiers. Right? Now, they'll be working for you. You're working for me, and they're working for you. You follow me. Layered, like nachos. Exponential growth. Now that's success with a capital "S."

After the meeting, Jesse walks out to Walter's car, where Walter is waiting. He gets in the car and turns to Walter.

Jesse Pinkman: We're set. Our boys are ready, gonna be some mad cheddar, yo. Cheddar, Mr. White. Fat stacks, dead presidents, cash money. Gonna own this city.

Walter White: We're not charging enough.

Jesse Pinkman: What?

Walter White: Corner the market, then raise the price. Simple economics.

Again, the possibilities for expansion and "exponential growth" here are premised on intimidation and violent reputations. Walter and Jesse, in Jesse's words, can now sell when they want, where they want because they can invoke fear. Jesse's quote above illustrates the argument that the "gangster readily takes what he wants from others, whether through extortion or hostile take-over, [and this] exemplifies capital accumulation in its most primitive form. The cinematic gangster reminds us that self-interest and avarice reside in the heart of modern capitalism" (Pierson, 2013, p. 23). Also, when Walter talks about cornering the market in the above exchange, he is talking about monopolistic control. Harvey (2005) explains that most neoliberalist theorists believe monopolies and oligopolies maximize efficiency, and of course monopolistic control falls under the purview of market freedom and market solutions in neoliberalism. Each moment, however, whether it is dealing with Tuco or planning for

expansion, involves dominant masculinity in the form of violence and intimidation as a requirement for success.

Walter and Gustavo

The connections between masculinity and entrepreneurialism continue throughout the narrative, particularly when Walter starts working for Gustavo Fring. Gustavo is first introduced in “Mandala” (Mastras & Bernstein, 2009; season two, episode 11), by a description from Saul Goodman, Walter and Jesse’s lawyer. Walter and Jesse meet with Saul to discuss their distribution problems after one of their dealers, Combo, gets killed in a territory dispute. Saul describes Gustavo in the following way:

Saul Goodman: ...what you two need is an honest-to-God businessman, alright?

Somebody who treats your product like the simple high-margin commodity that it is.

Somebody who ships out of town, deals only in bulk. Someone who’s been doing this for 20 years and never been caught.

Gustavo Fring owns a local fast food chain called “Los Pollos Hermanos.” He is articulate, professional, and keeps a low profile, driving a blue Volvo station wagon and dressing in muted outfits that make him look like a restaurant manager, rather than an owner. Pierson (2013b) describes Gustavo Fring as “the neoliberal entrepreneur par excellence” (p. 24). Though Gustavo appears to be a community leader and a supporter of social programs, “beneath the surface, lies the cold heart and rational, calculating head of a neoliberal criminal entrepreneur who uses his fleet of Los Pollos trucks to distribute meth across the Southwest” (p. 25).

While Pierson does hit on an important point, he does not consider Gustavo’s masculinity. Connell (2005) argues that it is a mistake to equate masculinity with only physical aggression. She writes, “Hegemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony partly by its claim to

embody the power of reason, and thus represent the interests of the whole society” (p. 164). The idea of men being rational and women being emotional is a familiar theme in patriarchy, but Connell argues that masculine rationality also crucially connects to modern capitalism and culture: “Advanced capitalism meant increased rationalization not only of business, but of culture as a whole—increasingly dominated by technical reason, that is, reason focused on efficiency about means rather than ultimate ends” (p. 164). Indeed, as a character, Gustavo embodies these characteristics. He is cold, rational, and cunning, and these characteristics are simultaneously masculine and entrepreneurial.

Walter respects these qualities in Gustavo, positioning him as a man to emulate. In “Kafkaesque,” (Gould, Mastras, & Slovis, 2010; season three, episode nine), Walter has already started producing meth for Gustavo and goes to meet him to discuss his contract. At this point in the story, two men have tried to kill Walter’s brother-in-law Hank, a DEA agent, but Hank has received a phone call warning him about the impending attack. Walter suspects that Gustavo was behind this phone call, which had much larger implications for Gustavo’s business. Walter tells Gustavo he admires this strategic move.

Walter White: My brother-in-law, moments before he was attacked, someone called to warn him. I believe that same person was protecting me. Those two men, the assassins, I believe I was their prime target, but that somehow, they were steered away from me to my brother-in-law. Because of this intervention, I am alive. And yet, I think that this person was playing a much deeper game. He made that phone call because he wanted a shootout, not a silent assassination. In one stroke, he bloodied both sides, set the American and Mexican governments against the cartel, and cut off the supply of methamphetamine to the Southwest. If this man had his own source of product on this

side of the border, he would have the market to himself. The rewards would be enormous. We're both adults. I can't pretend I don't know that person is you. I want there to be no confusion, I know I owe you my life. And more than that, I respect the strategy. In your position, I would have done the same.

Here, Walter admires this strategy for its entrepreneurial value: "The rewards would be enormous."

A unique masculine quality of *Breaking Bad* is linking a clear and calculating rationality with physical violence. Both Walter and Gustavo exhibit these characteristics. The various strategies employed by the two men throughout the narrative do resemble a game, as Walter notes above, with winners and losers. Throughout seasons three and four Walter and Gustavo become enemies. Given that both men demonstrate the same qualities of calculating ruthlessness and violence, they are indeed worthy adversaries. In "Face Off" (Gilligan, 2011; season four, episode 13), Walter tries desperately to kill Gustavo by first trying to enlist Jesse to poison him, then attempting to plant a bomb in his car, and finally placing an explosive on one of Gustavo's former enemies from the Mexican drug cartel, Tio Salamanca, who lives in a nursing home. The last ploy is successful. Skyler hears about the murder on the news and, while on the phone with Walter moments later, expresses her concerns.

Skyler White: Jesus, Walt, the news here...Gus Fring is dead. He was blown up along with some person from some Mexican cartel and the DEA has no idea what to make of it.

Do you know about this? Walt? I need you to...

Walter White: It's over, we're safe.

Skyler White [quietly]: Was this you? What happened?

Walter White: I won.

In an article linking neoliberalism with neoconservatism, Brown (2006) explains, “the political rationality of neoliberalism is expressly about winners and losers based on entrepreneurial skill” (p. 701). For Gustavo and Walter, entrepreneurial skill in their line of business includes violence—forcefully pushing competitors out in order to survive. *Breaking Bad* links rationality, masculinity, and entrepreneurship in significant ways throughout the series. However, the entrepreneurship exhibited connects deeply with a primitive and primal form of competition that relies directly on physical violence and murder. Of course, not all forms of entrepreneurship involve violence or crime, but this is the case within the narrative world of *Breaking Bad*. Linking entrepreneurship and white masculinity in this way places it in a primal “dog-eat-dog” formulation. Walter’s ability to set aside emotion and morality reaches a fever pitch toward the end of the series.

I Am The Danger

In the last two seasons of *Breaking Bad* Walter becomes extremely violent, calculating, and merciless. Throughout his trajectory as a character these qualities become a source of pride for him. Walter builds this pride through negative reflection on his life before he became a criminal. Faucette (2013) explains that Walter at the beginning of the series “is dissatisfied with his situation in life because he is not in charge of his classroom, his income, his life, or his sexuality” (p. 77). Indeed, Walter is characterized as weak at key points in the story. In “Gray Matter” (Lin & Brock, 2008; season one, episode five), he tells his family why he initially chooses not to get treatment for his lung cancer.

Walter White: Sometimes, I feel like I never actually make any of my own. Choices, I mean. My entire life, it must seem I never, you know, had a, had a real say about any of it. Now this last one, cancer, all I have left is how I choose to approach this.

Later, in “Better Call Saul,” (Gould & McDonough, 2009; season two, episode eight), Walter expresses his negative reflection about his own life to Hank.

Walter White: I have spent my whole life scared. Frightened of things that could happen, might happen, might not happen. Fifty years I’ve spent like that, finding myself awake at three in the morning. But you know what? Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine...I came to realize it’s that fear, that’s the worst of it—that’s the real enemy. So, get up, get out in the real world and you kick that bastard as hard as you can right in the teeth.

Of course, this quote occurs after Walter has started producing meth, his own way of kicking “that bastard right in the teeth.” These reflections are certainly revealing of Walter’s (and cultural) conceptions of his masculinity prior to becoming a criminal, but they are also important to understand how Walter’s transition into a more dominant masculinity is intrinsically linked to neoliberal principles.

By the end of the series, Walter is completely changed. In a scene in “Cornered” (Hutchison & Slovis, 2011; season four, episode six), Skyler tries to convince Walter that he needs help. At this point, Skyler is fully aware of Walter’s criminal behavior and she insists that if he is ever in danger, they need to go to the police to ensure the family’s safety. She has learned about the murder of Gale Boetticher, a meth chemist who she suspects was involved with Walter. She is correct in her suspicion, but is unaware that Walter ordered Jesse to go to Gale’s apartment and shoot him.

Skyler White: Walt. I’ve said it before. if you are in danger, we go to the police.

Walter White: Oh, no, I don’t want to hear about the police!

Skyler White: You’re not some hardened criminal, Walt, you are in over your head.

That’s what we tell them.

Walter White: That is not the truth.

Skyler White: Of course it is! A school teacher, cancer, desperate for money?

Walter White: Okay, we're done here.

Skyler White: Roped into working for, unable to even quit? You told me that yourself,

Walt. Jesus, what was I thinking? Walt, please. Let's both of us stop trying to justify this whole thing and admit you're in danger.

Walter White [emphatically]: Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make in a year? I mean, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe me. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going into work? A business big enough that it could be listed on the NASDAQ goes belly up, disappears? It ceases to exist without me. No. You clearly don't understand who you're talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. *I am the danger*. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks.

Of course, being “the danger” has a dominant masculine meaning. Walter is no longer the victim that he was during his pre-diagnosis life. Instead, now he has the power to commit violence and victimize others. It is striking that the masculine power Walter exposes in this scene is so closely linked with his monetary power. In fact, most of the quote above centers on Walter's financial value as an entrepreneur. Walter, in effect, describes himself above as financially “too big to fail.” The phrase “too big to fail” is typically applied to a financial organization that is “so important to the economy of a country that a government or a central bank must take measures to prevent it from ceasing to trade or going bankrupt” (“too big to fail,” 2014). In an essay arguing that neoliberal practices are alive and well in financial and government solutions, Aalbers (2013)

explains that banks that are “too big to fail” are actually even bigger than before the financial crisis of 2008.

Walter again emphasizes the extent of his financial power and ambition in “Buyout,” (Hutchison & Bucksey, 2012; season five, episode six). At this point in the story, Jesse, Walter, and Mike Ehrmantraut have started producing and selling meth together. Jesse and Mike want to quit the business after one of their operations results in the death of a child. They plan to sell their remaining chemicals to another meth producer for a buyout of five million dollars each. Walter refuses to be part of this deal. In desperation, Jesse goes to Walter and tries to convince him to take the buyout.

Jesse Pinkman: Look, when you, uh, when you started this thing, did you ever dream of having \$5 million? I know for a fact that you didn't. I know for a fact all you needed was 737,000, 'cause you worked it all out, like mathematically. Look, if selling the methylamine now means that no one else ever gets killed, then I vote for that, man, hands down. And we could have it tomorrow. We would be out! You could spend time with your family. No more worrying about them getting hurt or finding out about everything. Isn't this what you've been working for?

Walter White: I have not been working this hard just to sell out!

Jesse Pinkman: It's not selling out!

Walter White: Yes, it is, Jesse. I hav—We have suffered and bled, literally, for this business, and I will not throw it away for nothing.

Jesse Pinkman: I don't know how else to say it, Mr. White, \$5 million isn't nothing.

Walter White: Jesse, have you ever hear of a company called Gray Matter?

Jesse Pinkman: No.

Walter White: Well, I co-founded it in grad school with a couple of friends of mine. Actually, I was the one who named it. And, back then, it was just, oh, it was just small-time, we had a couple patents pending, but nothing earth-shattering. ‘Course we all knew the potential. Yeah, we were going to take the world by storm. And then, this, uh, well, something happened between the three of us, and I’m not gonna go into detail, but for personal reasons, I decided to leave the company. And I sold my share to my two partners. I took a buyout for \$5,000. Now at the time, that was a lot of money for me. Care to guess what that company is worth now?

Jesse Pinkman: Millions?

Walter White: Billions, with a “B,” 2.16 billion as of last Friday. I look it up every week. And I sold my share, my potential, for \$5,000. I sold my kids’ birthright for a few months rent.

Jesse Pinkman: This isn’t the same thing.

Walter White: Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I’m in the empire business.

A key point in this exchange comes from Jesse, who suggests that selling their chemicals and getting out of the business means “no one else ever gets killed.” For Jesse, the violence of the meth business is unacceptable, but Walter is less concerned about these harsh realities. For Walter, violence is an unavoidable part of his business, so much so that he uses the term “empire” to refer to his ambitions. Though “empire” can be used to describe a massive corporate business, it is also a term with very violent connotations with the historic associations of the British and Roman empires. Prash (2005) argues that neoliberalism and empire are causally

linked. He presents historic parallels from the British Empire to contemporary political and economic conditions, writing

Great Britain's formal and informal empire expanded substantially during the nineteenth century...Its aim was a global system of free markets, free trade, and free capital flows. Likewise it is evident that what is termed globalization in the United States, and neoliberalism everywhere else, is also associated with the acquisition of an empire by the United States. (pp. 281-282)

Walter, the "danger," the man who has the ability to victimize those weaker than he is, desires complete financial domination with his business. He sees his former self as taken advantage of and foolish for not recognizing his potential. He describes his actions and desires now as redemption, an accelerated comeback story. Walter's desires are also linked to his pride that his methamphetamine is the best product on the market.

The Product

Walter's knowledge of chemistry allows him to create an exceptionally pure methamphetamine product. This is a source of pride for Walter throughout the series. In "Say My Name," (Schnauz, 2012; season five, episode seven), he is able to broker a deal with Declan, another meth producer and distributor, using the purity of his product to close the deal. After Walter refuses to sell his methylamine (a key ingredient in producing methamphetamine), he comes up with a solution that will satisfy Jesse and Mike. Walter will continue to cook meth, but he needs distribution for his product, which Declan can provide, if he is willing.

Walter White: I know all about your operation. See, my partners here tell me that you produce a meth that's 70% pure if you're lucky. What I produce is 99.1%.

Declan: So?

Walter White: So...it's grade school T-Ball versus the New York Yankees. Yours is, uh, just some tepid, off-brand, generic cola. What I'm making is classic Coke.

Declan: Alright. Okay. So, um, uh, if we just waste you right here, right now, and leave you in the desert, then there is no more Coke on the market, right? See how that works? There's only us.

Walter White: Do you really want to live in a world without Coca Cola?...My partner tells me that your crew switched to a P2P cook because of our success. You dye your meth with food coloring to make it look like mine. You already ape my product at every turn, but now, you have the opportunity to sell it yourself.

Declan: I need you to listen to me. We're not going to give up this deal to be your errand boys, do you understand? For what? To watch a bunch of junkies get a better high?

Walter White: A better high means customers pay more, a higher purity means a greater yield. That's 130 million dollars of profit that isn't being pissed away by some substandard cook.

Declan agrees to provide distribution for Walter, persuaded by the above logic. Walter's argument that "the best" product will rule the market speaks to the logic of neoliberalism; the best products will naturally win out over substandard products in a "free market." The ability to broker this deal demonstrates Walter's sense of entrepreneurialism. Later in the episode, Walter tries to get Jesse to continue cooking with him again, using his product's purity as the central argument.

Walter: Jesse this...what we do, being the best at something, is a very rare thing. You don't just toss something like that away. And what? You want to squander that potential—your potential. Why?

Here, Walter is making up for the perceived mistake of having his partners buy him out of Gray Matter decades earlier. Now, he has achieved a type of ascendancy—being the best at something—that creates pride and worth for him as a businessman.

Another important quality of *Breaking Bad* is the way it portrays the processes of producing and consuming methamphetamine. Often positive and uplifting music accompanies the montages of meth production and consumption in the series. Nardi (2013) argues that these montages in *Breaking Bad* create ambiguity for the viewer, where morally reprehensible behavior, meth production and consumption, is juxtaposed with songs about peace and unity. The ambiguity obscures the realities of meth use in the world. Pierson (2013) describes methamphetamine as a neoliberal drug “because it provides low-wage workers with more energy to work longer hours. It enables them to work fourteen-hour days and stay awake for as long as three weeks” (p. 25). I mention this here because newer data supports Pierson’s claim. Pedersen, Sandberg, and Copes (2015), in a study of methamphetamine addicts, found that users’ second most common reason for using the drug was to *work harder for longer hours*. One of their interviewees said: “I love working. Amphetamine is about increased effort, keeping the speed up. I really worked bloody efficient” (p. 9). The male amphetamine users interviewed in the Pederson study had physically strenuous jobs and the drug allowed them to maintain energy and efficiency during monotonous, repetitive labor. The female amphetamine users took the drug to keep up with work and household responsibilities like cleaning and childcare.

How does this figure into the picture of masculinity? The ambiguity or ambivalence about meth production and consumption presented in the series connects to the calculating, brutal, and rational-minded masculinities in the show. All Walter and Gus see when they look at methamphetamine use are business opportunities, not social problems. In “Madrigal” (Gilligan &

MacLaren, 2012; season five, episode two), Walter tells Jesse and Saul emphatically: “There is gold in the streets, just waiting for someone to come and scoop it up.” As Nardi (2013) notes, the musical montages that accompany meth production and consumption create ambiguity, and this can obscure the realities of meth use throughout the world. In *Breaking Bad*, calculating entrepreneurial rationality supersedes social compassion. Thus, the ambiguity present in the text prioritizes the “success” and celebration of profiting off of a vulnerable population of drug addicts, which also obscures the potential for social concern for this population.

The Provider

Describing the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher, Harvey (2005) explains, in the U.K., “all forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values” (p. 23). These characteristics indeed follow the general political philosophy of neoliberalism, but they also have a gendered subtext. Sawyer (1996) demonstrates that metaphors of small government, such as “self-reliance” and “independence,” tend to have masculine connotations, whereas metaphors of the welfare state tend to have female connotations, such as “the nanny state,” “protective,” and “socially responsible.” She writes,

The concept of the ethical or welfare state is depicted as incompatible with self-reliant masculinity and indeed as emasculating. Real men have to break away from “mother” and require only a referee or a policeman to ensure that the rules are observed in a world where they test themselves against other men. Real men are not entangled in the web of interdependence which is revealed by social liberal and feminist accounts of citizenship. They belong to that simpler world of “man against the state.” (p. 132)

Part of the self-reliance in conceptions of white masculinity involves providing for oneself and for one's family. Throughout *Breaking Bad* Walter continually exhibits forms of masculine self-reliance while denying mutual aid, charity, and compassion from others.

Self-Reliance vs. Charity

Early in the series, in "Gray Matter" (Lin & Brock, 2008; season one, episode two), Walter and Skyler are invited to Elliot Schwartz's birthday party. Elliot Schwartz is one of the founders of the successful Gray Matter company, which Walter left behind before the company started making money. At the party, Skyler tells Elliot about Walter's cancer diagnosis and Elliot offers to help Walter. Instead of accepting the support, Walter takes offense at the offer.

Walter White: What the hell did you say to Elliot?

Skyler White: What?

Walter White: You told him about the cancer, didn't you? Didn't you? *Didn't you?* ... I can't believe it.

Skyler White: Okay, we were talking. He asked how you were doing, and I am sorry that I don't have the best poker face these days where that's concerned. He knew something was wrong with you and he pressed me.

Walter White: He pressed you... come on.

Skyler White: Walt, when it came right down to it, I didn't know what else to do but to tell him the truth.

Walter White: The truth? How about if you just said "he's fine," huh? You think maybe you could have just have said that? "He's fine," and then it would have been done.

...

Skyler White: So, what exactly did he say to you?!

Walter White: He offered me a job.

Skyler White [excited]: What?

Walter White: Yes, kind of like some fig leaf, you know? Some face-saving bullshit that allowed me to generously accept his charity. And then, when I turned that down, he flat-out offered to pay for my treatment, which is exactly what you expected him to do, didn't you?

...

Skyler White: Okay, so what did you say? Walt?

Walter White: What do you think I said?

Skyler White: Why? Walt?

Walter again reveals his feelings about charity in "Phoenix" (Shiban & Bucksey, 2009; season two, episode 12), when his son, Walter Jr. (also known as Flynn), creates a website for people to donate money to Walter. Skyler takes Walter and her sister Marie into Walter Jr.'s room to see the website.

Skyler White: Your son. He's just unbelievable. Come see what he did.

Walter White Jr.: I told you it's not ready yet.

Skyler White: Honey, just show it to them.

The website has pictures of Walter and Walter Jr. hugging. It has a green background with gold stars and in the center it shows a pictures of Walter with his head shaved.

Walter White: My God, son, that's wonderful.

Marie Schrader: Flynn, this is beautiful. SaveWalterWhite.com. Well, I for one am telling everybody.

Walter White: Wait a minute. You're not asking for money, are you, son?

Walter White Jr.: That's the whole idea. Louis helped me set up a PayPal account and, and everything.

Walter White: Oh...

Walter White Jr.: See?

Walter White: But we can't ask for money. I appreciate it. I really do.

Skyler White: Walt.

Skyler motions with her head to talk to Walter outside of their son's room. They walk into the hallway.

Skyler White: You can't ask him to take it down. It'll crush him.

Walter White: Skyler, it's charity.

Skyler White: Why do you say that like it's some sort of...dirty word?

The characterization of Walter as a man vehemently opposed to charity seems logical; if he was willing to accept help and support from others it is doubtful he would be driven to such drastic measures to support his family and pay for his medical bills. Self-reliance is central to Walter's masculinity; indeed, whenever he mentions the profit he has made from meth production and distribution, he uses the term "earned."

In "I.F.T." (Mastras & MacLaren, 2010; season three, episode three), Walter has told Skyler about his criminal activity and confronts her with the money he has earned so far. Skyler sits across from Walter in their living room, while a giant black duffle bag of money sits between them.

Walter White: I've done a terrible thing. But I did it for a good reason. I did it for us.

That...is college tuition for Walter Jr. and Holly, 18 years down the road. That is health insurance for you and the kids. For Junior's physical therapy, his SAT tutor. It's money

for groceries, gas, for birthdays and graduation parties. Skyler, that money is for this roof over your head, the mortgage you aren't going to be able to afford on a part-time bookkeeper's salary when I'm gone.

Skyler White [shaking her head]: Walt, I...

Walter White: Please. Please. This money, I didn't steal it. It doesn't belong to anyone else. I *earned it*. The things I've...done...to earn it...the things that I've had to do...I've got to live with them. Skyler, all that I've done, all the sacrifices that I have made for this family, all of it will be for nothing if you don't accept what I've earned. Please.

Walter seems to show some regret in the above exchange for the things he has had to do for his money. Yet, Walter would rather have these regrets than take money from strangers or from his wealthy acquaintances. The notion of "earning" success and financial security is central to the concept of self-reliance, even if violence and illegal actions were necessary.

As mentioned, Walter is proud of his product and his entrepreneurial success and he takes on the role of "the provider" with pride in *Breaking Bad*. In "Phoenix" (Shiban & Bucksey, 2009; season two, episode 12), Walter and Skyler are sleeping when their newborn baby, Holly, starts crying. Skyler wakes up and moans and Walter sits up and says, "I'll get her." In the next scene, Walter feeds Holly in the kitchen and bounces her gently.

Walter White: Yeah, good girl. That's a good girl. My little girl, huh?

[Walter puts her vertically against his chest and pats her back. He pauses.]

Walter White: Hey, do you want to see something, mmm? Come here. Oh, I know, I know.

[He takes Holly into the garage and turns on the light.]

Walter White: Hey you want to see what your daddy did for you? Let me show you.

Here. Come here. Sh, sh, sh, sh. Want to see?

[Walter shifts Holly into his right arm and lifts up the insulation on the wall of his garage revealing two enormous stacks of cash.]

Walter: Huh?

[He lifts up another panel of insulation revealing another two large stacks of cash.]

Walter White: That's right. Daddy did that.

[He stares at Holly, holding her.]

Walter White: Daddy did that for you.

Walter is so proud of his money, so willing to take on the role as the provider, that he shows his newborn baby, for whom this display is meaningless, his vast earnings. This scene is particularly fascinating because Walter's feminine actions of feeding Holly and talking sweetly to her are contrasted sharply with his masculine displays of money and patriarchal power.

Sawyer (1996) explains that one of the feminine metaphors of the state in neoliberal discourse is "the breast." She writes, "Neo-liberal discourse suggests that citizens must be forcibly weaned from the breast of the state in order that male citizens can become manly again" (p. 130). The above scene demonstrates certain shifting characteristics of white masculinity; Walter will take the responsibility of childcare, but he will not accept charity to help support himself or his family. Thus, Walter is comfortable caring for his own children—in a sense providing "the breast" for his own daughter—but he will not accept the same support from others because this constitutes too great of a threat to his masculinity. The above scene supports the self-reliance of neoliberalism, but also emphasizes the importance of the patriarchal nuclear family in this political philosophy.

There is perhaps no better illustration of the importance of providing for one's family, no matter the cost, than a scene involving Walter and Gustavo in "Más" (Walley-Beckett & Renck, 2010; season three, episode six). At this point in the story, Walter has decided to stop producing meth, but Gustavo tries to convince him to continue. Gustavo builds Walter a high-tech meth laboratory in the basement of an industrial laundromat he owns, and he brings Walter to this lab to persuade him to continue cooking.

Walter White: What is this?

Gustavo Fring: Your new lab.

...

Gustavo Fring: The laundry upstairs, I've owned it for years. It receives large chemical deliveries on a weekly basis; detergents and such. There is nothing suspicious about it, and my employees, to be sure, are well-trained, trustworthy. The filtration system is state of the art. It will vent nothing but clean, odorless steam just as the laundry does and through the very same stacks. I need 200 pounds per week to make this economically viable. You would choose your own hours, of course, come and go as you please so long as the quota is met.

Walter White: Sorry...the answer is still no. I have made a series of very bad decisions and I cannot make another one.

Gustavo Fring: Why did you make these decisions?

Walter White: For the good of my family.

Gustavo Fring: Then they weren't bad decisions...What does a man do, Walter? A man *provides* for his family.

Walter White: This cost me my family.

Gustavo Fring: When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, *a man provides*. And he does it even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up, and he does it, because *he's a man*.

The message here is clear: a man provides for his family no matter the cost. It is his responsibility and he must do this on his own, without charity or support from others.

A contradiction that continues throughout *Breaking Bad* has to do with its potential to be read as a critical text. The stage is set in this narrative to engender a critique of neoliberalism and white masculinity. In effect, the economic and healthcare problems portrayed in the series drive Walter to become a criminal. One possible reading of Walter's story is that neoliberalism and untenable masculine standards breed criminals, violence, and destruction. Of course, one would need to conduct an ethnographic audience reception study to determine if this reading actually exists among *Breaking Bad* fans. However, if considering only the text in isolation, the structure of its narrative does not lend itself fully to this critique. That is, Walter's rebellion against systemic inequality and inaccessible healthcare does not involve organized social activism, or cooperation, or protest. Instead, Walter *replicates* the oppressive standards that held him down before he became a criminal. He changes from being the victim of masculine ascendancy and economic inequality to setting the standards for these oppressive systems. His dire situation is not categorized as political. He does not advocate for changing healthcare policy, or higher pay for public school teachers; in fact, he doesn't even ask for a raise! No, for Walter, this is *a challenge*, a challenge that resonates deeply with his perceived masculine failures. In effect, *Breaking Bad* is the story of a "man against the state" (Sawer, 1996, p. 132).

Technical, Scientific Solutions

Walter's power throughout *Breaking Bad*—entrepreneurial and masculine—derives from his scientific knowledge. His proficiency in chemistry allows him to produce a high-purity methamphetamine that drug users desire. Additionally, he relies on scientific knowledge to solve complex problems throughout the span of the series. This type of scientific problem solving also connects to Walter's masculinity.

“Yeah Science!”

In a scene previously mentioned, Walter is able to win the respect of Tuco Salamanca by creating an explosion in his office with fulminated mercury. After the explosion, Walter holds up a bag of the mercury, threatening to set off another explosion. Tuco consents to pay Walter the money he owes him and agrees to an ongoing business partnership.

Tuco Salamanca: ... You got balls. I'll give you that. Alright, alright, I'll give you your money. That crystal that your partner brought me, it sold faster than \$10 ass in TJ. What do you say you bring me another pound next week?

Walter White: Money up front.

Tuco Salamanca: Alright, money up front. Sometimes you got to rob to keep your riches. Just as long as we got an understanding.

Walter White: One pound is not going to cut it. You have to take two.

Tuco Salamanca [laughs]: Odelay. Hey, what is that shit?

Walter White: Fulminated mercury... a little tweak of chemistry.

Walter exits Tuco's office after this last line. He walks out to his car with a duffle bag full of money. He gets into his car and looks at the money in the black bag. He holds up the money in his hand and starts grunting and growling. This boisterous display demonstrates a form of

masculine celebration similar to the celebrations in football after a touchdown. Science, and his mastery of science, is the primary factor in Walter's "win" in this altercation with Tuco.

Entire episodes revolve around technical problems that Walter must solve in order for the narrative to continue. Many times Jesse depends on Walter's scientific knowledge to get them out of difficult situations. Often when these scientific solutions succeed, Jesse will shout or say "Yeah science!" which becomes a type of catch phrase for Jesse's character throughout the series. In "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal" (Gould & Hunter, 2008; season one, episode seven), Jesse and Walter plan to cook four pounds of meth for Tuco, but Jesse questions whether this is possible because he cannot imagine how to get the necessary ingredients for such a large cook. At this point in the story, the meth Jesse is used to cooking requires a large quantity of Sudafed, and to get this he hires "smurfs," people who individually buy small amounts of Sudafed so as to not arouse suspicion. Walter, however, has a plan.

Jesse Pinkman: Four pounds! *Four pounds!* Two pounds wasn't bad enough. We're talking 200-300 boxes of sinus pills. There ain't that many smurfs in the world.

Walter White: We're not going to need pseudoephedrine. We're going to make phenylacetone in a tube furnace, then we're gonna use reductive animation to yield methamphetamine, four pounds.

Jesse Pinkman: So no pseudo?

Walter White: No pseudo.

Jesse Pinkman: So you do have a plan. Yeah Mr. White! Yeah science!

At other, more desperate times, Jesse begs Walter to come up with scientific solutions to solve problems. In "4 Days Out" (Catlin & MacLaren, 2009; season two, episode nine), Walter

and Jesse are stranded in the desert after their RV breaks down. They run out of water and food. Desperate for a solution, Jesse pleads with Walter to think of something.

Jesse Pinkman: Kay, you need to cut out all your loser crybaby crap right now and think of something scientific!

Walter White [laughing, defeated]: Something scientific, right...

Jesse Pinkman: What! Come on! Man, you're smart. You made poison out of beans, yo. Look...we got an entire lab, right here. Alright, how 'bout you take some of these chemicals and mix up some, some rocket fuel! Or we could just send up a signal flare...or you make some kind of robot to get us help, or a homing device...or building a battery. Or wait, no...what if we just take some stuff off the RV and build it into something completely different, you know, like a...like a dune buggy. Yeah, that way we can just dune buggy our...

At this point in the scene the camera focuses on Walter. He holds up his hand and sits up, indicating that he has thought of a scientific solution. He then orders Jesse to get the materials required to make a replacement battery to get the RV started again.

These types of technical and scientific solutions occur constantly throughout *Breaking Bad*. As Walter's masculinity transitions throughout the series, he becomes more certain of his ability to use technical and scientific knowledge to solve problems, at times displaying his power and control with pride. In "Live Free or Die" (Gilligan & Slovis, 2012; season five, episode one), Walter, Jesse, and Mike realize that the police have Gustavo's laptop computer, which contains evidence capable of incriminating the men. Their solution to the problem is to destroy the laptop by using a giant magnet. The men take the magnet from a junkyard, where it is normally used to lift and move cars, and place it into a truck which they drive into the police station and park next

to the evidence room. Walter and Jesse then activate the magnet which smashes everything in the evidence room including Gustavo's laptop. In the process, they tip over the truck, which they are forced to abandon in order to make their escape. While the men speed away in Mike's car, Walter expresses his certainty about their success.

Jesse Pinkman: Yeah! Bitch!

Mike Ehrmantraut: Shut up! What exactly are you celebrating? You left the truck behind!

Walter White: So what?

Mike Ehrmantraut: So what? So what if they find prints? And what if they trace it back to the wrecking yard?

Walter White: They won't. There's no prints, I made sure of that. There's no paperwork on the truck, the magnet, or the batteries. Untraceable salvage, all of it, made sure of that too.

Mike Ehrmantraut: Well, you've got all the answers. So you tell me, answer man, did all of that even work just now?

Walter White: Yes, it worked.

Mike Ehrmantraut: I'm supposed to take that on faith? Yeah? Why? How do we know?

Walter White: Because I say so.

After Walter utters this last line, the car falls silent. Jesse looks back toward Walter in awe of this authoritative statement. Mike glares at him in the rearview mirror, narrows his eyes, and finally looks away.

Walter is the authority when it comes to scientific and technical solutions, and this authority is certainly culturally coded as masculine. Connell (2005) describes the masculinization of science:

For it has been shown, in convincing historic detail, that natural science itself has a gendered character. Western science and technology are culturally masculinized. This is not just a question of personnel, though it is a fact that the great majority of scientists and technologists are men. The guiding metaphors of scientific research, the impersonality of its discourse, the structures of power and communication in science, the reproduction of its internal culture, all stem from the social position of dominant men in a gendered world. The dominance of science in discussion of masculinity thus reflects the position of masculinity (or specific masculinities) in the social relations of gender. (p. 6)

Of course, the scientific masculinity Walter exhibits also connects to his entrepreneurial skill throughout the series. As mentioned, Walter deploys cold and calculating measures to remain in control throughout *Breaking Bad* and often these measures involve scientific solutions.

Is neoliberalism in operation here, though? The connection between scientific masculinity and neoliberalism arises from changes in capitalism. Connell (2005) explains that advanced capitalism involves increased rationalization in business and within culture as a whole. Winter and Robert (1980) argue that masculinities are reshaped to fit these changes:

“Increasingly one finds masculinity identified with the traits that represent the individual internalisation of the forms of technical reason, for it is technical reason itself that constitutes the major form of repression in contemporary society” (p. 270).

Walter’s scientific knowledge and abilities can also connect to the changes in labor and production accompanying post-Fordism. Fordism refers to the social formation of the United States and Western Europe after 1945 that involved large-scale industrial production of standardized goods in the context of mass consumption; it required high wages and worked in tandem with Keynesian economics (Barker, 2004). *Post-Fordism* refers to the successful

neoliberal restructuring of capitalism after 1970, which involved a reorganization of labor processes that included “flexible specialization” as a new standard for workers (Barker, 2004). Amin (1994) defines flexible specialization as “characterized by new principles of production, including specialist units of production, decentralized management and versatile technologies and workforces to satisfy increasingly volatile markets” (p. 2). Flexible specialization refers to concepts such as “multitasking” and an increasingly technical and adaptive knowledge that can be exploited when necessary across various operations (Barker, 2004). Walter’s ability to apply his scientific knowledge to the countless problems that arise in the narrative of *Breaking Bad* mark him as possessing the flexible specialization qualities of post-Fordist production processes. Walter’s ingenuity is *rewarded* throughout the series because his success depends on his ability to adapt his knowledge to complex problems and circumstances.

Negotiations and Incorporation

To maintain dominance within hegemonic systems, powerful groups must invest in “winning” the consent of subordinate groups (Gramsci, 1971a). In this sense, hegemonic systems are mobile—they must change to fit the social circumstances of a particular time and culture; for this reason, hegemony is always a *temporary* settlement that must be constantly re-made and re-won (Barker, 2004). This restructuring and constant mobility are central to systems of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). To understand systems of masculinity, it is essential to examine how hegemonic masculinities change and absorb new identities and manifestations. Butsch (2001) advocates for a greater understanding of moments of incorporation, which is the term used to refer to moments when hegemonic systems appropriate and co-opt new and/or different strategies to maintain dominance. Incorporation occurs when dominant systems appropriate resistance movements to win the consent of subordinate groups

(Butsch, 2001). The text *Breaking Bad* contains distinct moments of incorporation that deal with gender and neoliberalism. These moments are crucial for this analysis because they demonstrate how the dominant ideological forces of neoliberalism incorporate feminine qualities.

To this point, the present analysis has argued for the overlapping features of neoliberalism and white masculinity. These arguments do not propose that neoliberalism will always and forever take on masculine connotations; rather, I hope I have shown what these two systems have in common and how this can broaden our understanding of both masculinity and neoliberalism. Of course, “the individual” in neoliberalism is gender-neutral (Connell, 2005), but the entrepreneur, the male “provider,” the metaphors of deregulation, and the scientific rationality all connect to the realm of masculinity in various ways. If the individual is gender-neutral, we can certainly point to various ways that female characters in *Breaking Bad* perform neoliberalism, as well as male characters who reside outside of dominant models of masculinity. It is also necessary to understand how these performances interact and collide with the dominant masculine features and characters on *Breaking Bad*.

Skyler

Walter’s wife, Skyler White, plays a number of roles in relation to her husband’s trajectory in the narrative of *Breaking Bad*. One of these roles involves taking on the entrepreneurial characteristics more frequently attributed to Walter in the series. These key moments distinguish Skyler from the women of *The Sopranos* because, textually, Janice Soprano and Carmela Soprano exhibit far fewer entrepreneurial characteristics than Skyler. Yes, both Janice and Carmela struggle and sometimes disrupt the masculine financial world of *The Sopranos*, but they are both largely excluded from this sphere by the narrative’s male characters. Though Carmela demonstrates financial management skills, she is never able to break away from

Tony's control in this regard. Carmela conducts almost all of her independent monetary endeavors in secret, and Tony never allows Carmela any control over or knowledge of his financial decisions. *Breaking Bad*'s Skyler, however, demonstrates entrepreneurship and financial agency repeatedly. She even participates in and often operates as the controlling voice of Walter's business decisions. Despite all this, vestiges of patriarchy still permeate these portrayals of Skyler.

In "Abiquiú" (Schnauz & Shiban, 2010; season three, episode 11), Walter takes Skyler to meet with his lawyer, Saul Goodman, to discuss their plan to launder his drug money. Pierson (2013b) explains the connection between money laundering and neoliberalism:

Neo-liberalism's liberalization and deregulation of banking and financial laws have led to the increase of money laundering... While money laundering is an illegal activity, it does share affinities with rapid monetary exchanges and established tax haven countries, which have become common practices of global corporations in neoliberal societies. (p. 24)

At this point in the story, Walter has told Skyler about his criminal activity and she starts to serve as his accomplice, at first in minor ways. For example, together they decide to use Walter's drug money to pay for physical therapy for their brother-in-law, Hank Schrader. During the meeting with Saul, Skyler demonstrates her financial knowledge and criticizes Saul's plan to launder Walter's money.

Saul Goodman: So, Walt tells me that you have some concerns I can alleviate.

Skyler White: Yes, I do. I have concerns, Um, if we're going down this road, and clearly we are, for the sake of my brother-in-law.

Saul Goodman [placating]: I've heard about him—he's an American hero.

Skyler White: At any rate, I need some assurances that we're gonna go about this in a manner that is extremely safe and cautious.

Saul Goodman: Fair enough. I'll walk you through the process. First step is something we like to call *money laundering*, alright? Take your money, represented by, say, these jelly beans.

Skyler White: You know, I'm a bookkeeper, so I actually know what money laundering is.

Saul Goodman: Uh, huh, well.

Skyler White: Yeah, and with most things, the devil is in the details. So to begin with, what are we saying is the source of this money?

Saul Goodman: That's simple, uh, Walt here actually came up with a great story about gambling winnings. Blackjack, right? Some card-counting system?

Walter White: Oh, well, actually that was Skyler's idea.

Saul Goodman: Well, you grow more gorgeous by the minute. Well, there you have it. I'll generate false Currency Transaction Reports out the wazoo as well as the necessary W-2Gs. I know a couple casino managers who will jump at the chance to report false losses. It's a win-win for everyone.

Skyler White: Yeah, but you can't sell that for very long...

Saul Goodman: Yeah, yeah, yeah, way ahead of you, we declare just enough not to arouse suspicion, then Walt's one-time winnings become seed money for an investment.

Skyler White: Investment in what?

Saul Goodman: Drum roll, please. Wait for it. *Laser tag*. Laser tag. Laser tag. 7,000 square feet of frolicking fun in the heart of northern Bernalillo County!

Skyler White [incredulous]: Laser. Tag?

Saul Goodman: Yeah, there's guns and glow lights, and kids wear the vests.

Skyler White: Yeah, no, no, I actually know what it is. It's just that in relation to Walt...it's, I mean [laughing], it doesn't make any sense.

Saul Goodman: Makes more sense than you two being together. I'm still trying to figure out how that happened.

Skyler White: Do you even know Walt? I mean, how would he, of all people buy a laser tag business? It, it, it doesn't add up.

Saul Goodman: It adds up perfectly, Walt's a scientist, scientists love lasers. Plus, they've got bumper boats so...

Skyler White [mockingly]: "Hey everybody, Walt suddenly decided to invest in laser tag. Just out of the blue." Really? That's what we're supposed to tell people, our family, our friends, the government?

Saul Goodman: Okay, let me bottom line this for you: *You don't need to be involved, okay?* I've been doing this for a lot of years, successfully, believe it or not, without your help, so, heh heh, thank you for stopping by.

Saul takes offense at Skyler's intervention; he assumes that Skyler could not come up with innovative ideas on her own and she should not be involved. Strangely, when Walter reveals that Skyler came up with the gambling ideas, Saul crassly says that she grows more gorgeous by the minute, but when Skyler begins to criticize his plan she's then framed as being too involved, too controlling.

After the meeting with Saul, as Skyler drives herself and Walter home, she criticizes Saul again.

Skyler White: Safe and cautious, that's all I'm asking, and that man...is neither.

Walter White: I'll admit he comes across like a circus clown, but he actually knows what he's doing—and safe and cautious is you not being involved in this at all.

Skyler White: Well, it's a little late on that. This is what happens when you decide to pay our bills with drug money.

Walter White: This isn't just about what happened before. My involvement in this is ongoing, understand? I can't just quit. I have, uh, something of a contract. But it's all very safe professional, structured like, I can't simply quit.

[Skyler turn on her turn signal.]

Walter White: Where are you going?

[She pulls into the A1A Carwash parking lot and stops the car.]

Skyler White: If you're going to launder money, Walt, at least do it right.

[They exit the car and stand beside it, looking at the car wash.]

Skyler White: You worked here for four years. It's a business you understand. It's a story people will believe. Not laser tag. This. This is what we buy. This is what you buy.

Skyler's idea for Walter to buy the carwash does prove to be much smarter than the laser tag option Saul offered. Not only is Skyler an accomplice here, she is actively influencing what decisions are made in Walter's business. This control is even apparent in her last line: "This is what we buy." At the same time, though, there is patriarchal tension that accompanies Skyler's control; she has to correct herself in the line above: "This is what *you* buy." This tension continues throughout the narrative of buying the carwash.

It is necessary to explain Skyler's "you worked here for four years" comments, above. During season one of the series, before getting into the meth business, Walter had worked as a

cashier at A1A Carwash in order to earn some extra money. His boss, Bogdan Wolynetz, was a tyrant of sorts. He made Walter wipe down cars, causing him to be mocked by high school students who recognized him as their chemistry teacher. Walter eventually quit A1A, storming out of the business and telling Bogdan to “Wipe down this!” while he grabbed his crotch. Familiarity with this history is necessary in order for a conversation in a subsequent season four episode (“Thirty-Eight Snub,” Mastras & MacLaren, 2011; season four, episode two) to make sense. In “Thirty-Eight Snub,” Skyler goes to A1A Carwash to make an offer to Bogdan.

Bogdan Wolynetz: You want to buy my car wash.

Skyler White: I do, and I’m prepared to talk numbers right now if you’d like.

Bogdan Wolynetz: Do you think this is an easy job? You are willing to get down on your hands and knees and scrub like a housemaid with all the chemicals eating into your nice skin and stinging your eyes?

Skyler White: I know a thing or two about scrubbing. Any other advice for me? Because I am serious about this.

Bogdan Wolynetz: Good, I am serious too. I have worked 30 years of building this business from nothing, with my own hands and my own sweat and blood.

Skyler White: I can appreciate that, truly. So, with that in mind, is there a figure you can quote me? One which you think would adequately take...

Bogdan Wolynetz: 10 million dollars.

Skyler White: Well, let’s try 879,000.

Bogdan Wolynetz: Where do you come up with this number? You pull it from your behind?

Skyler White: On a typical day, you manage 19 cars per hour. Extrapolating, I added the extra revenues for hand waxes and detailing, subtracted your overhead and salary and maintenance, operating fees, depreciation, which I obtained from comparable businesses in the Albuquerque area, giving me an estimate of your annual cash flow here, to which I applied the industry standard multiplier and added the market value of your real estate, giving me a total estimated value of \$829,000, on top of which I generously added an extra \$50,000 so as not to be insulting.

Bogdan Wolynetz: 20 million dollars.

Skyler White: Okay Mr. Wolynetz, this...

Bogdan Wolynetz: This is the price for Walter White.

Skyler White: Ah.

Bogdan Wolynetz: Oh yes, you don't think I know who you are? I remember.

Skyler White: Well, I have not pretended to be any...

Bogdan Wolynetz: Your husband, he quit without giving me notice. He broke my air fresheners. He cursed at me and grabbed himself. And now he wants to buy my car wash, but he's not man enough to come in here and face me himself. Instead, he sends his woman.

Skyler White: Excuse me?

Bogdan Wolynetz: Walter White wants to buy my car wash, the price he pays is 20 million. Now please leave.

This exchange demonstrates Skyler's entrepreneurial skills. She has done significant research on Bogdan's business and offers him a fair price for his car wash. Bogdan does not take her

seriously, presumably because of his anger at Walter, but also because Skyler is a woman. He says that Walter is not man enough to face him and instead “he sends his woman.”

After this attempt, Skyler meets with Walter and Saul in “Open House” (Catlin & Slade, 2011; season four, episode three) to discuss different options. At one point Walter asks Saul and Skyler if they should try to buy a different car wash.

Walter White: ...Look, do I need to state the obvious? I mean, there, there’s got to be dozens of car washes in this area. Who says it has to be this one?

Skyler White: I do. I say it has to.

Walter White: Why?

Skyler White: I just do.

Saul Goodman: Well, that clears things up.

Skyler White: I don’t like him. Bogdan. He was condescending to me, rude about you, and I do not like him. Simple as that.

...

Walter White: What do you, what do you mean “rude about me”?

Skyler White: Something along the lines of you weren’t man enough to face him yourself.

Walter White: What?

Skyler White: That you had to send your woman to do your business for you.

[Walter laughs and shakes his head, gritting his teeth.]

Saul Goodman: Okay, speaking as your lawyer, I’m going to go on record and say this is a bad idea.

Walter White: It’s this one.

Here, Skyler uses Bogdan's emasculating insult to stimulate Walter's interest in buying the car wash. This demonstrates a curious tension between gender and control. In effect, Skyler has to incite a masculine competition between Bogdan and Walter to legitimize her idea and ambition to buy A1A Carwash and use it to launder Walter's money.

Because Bogdan will not sell the car wash to her, Skyler must come up with a plan to force him to sell. Essentially, Walter and Skyler will hire an associate of Saul's to pretend to be a water treatment city official who will convince Bogdan he has to replace his entire plumbing system because it violates environmental standards. This plan is successful, but Walter and Skyler are unsure if Bogdan will sell the car wash as a result. Skyler waits by the phone, while Walter tries to gently convince Skyler that her plan failed.

Walter White: Well, it was a good try.

...

Skyler White: I think we wait.

Walter white: Wait? Skyler, it has been five hours.

Skyler White: He'll call, just wait.

Walter White: Just wait? Look, it was a good idea, it was a *great* idea, but it didn't work.

So why don't we simply chalk it up as a learning...

[The phone rings. Skyler picks it up.]

Skyler White: White residence. Oh, hello, Mr. Wolynetz, Am I still interested? Well, I, I think that depends. Yes, 879 was the original offer, but that seems high to me now. Now I'm offering 800.

Walter White [emphatically whispering]: No, no, no. No, no, don't do that.

Skyler White [on the phone]: Why?... Well, because you're an unpleasant person, Mr. Wolynetz. You were rude to me and disrespectful towards my husband... And furthermore, I've met with quite a number of sellers, and the market seems much softer than I thought, so 800... Uh huh, well, I understand that you're disappointed, but that is my final offer. I'm sorry we couldn't make it work. Goodbye.

[She hangs up the phone.]

Walter White: What are you doing?

Skyler White: I'm negotiating

Walter White: Why?

Skyler White: Because I want to pay less.

Walter White: Oh, now, \$79,000 less? Who cares? Do you know how much I make in a day?

Skyler White: Yeah, but that's the very reason we need to negotiate. We don't want to arouse suspicion by not trying to get a good deal.

Walter White: No, alright, look, I get the logic. I do. But you just went too far with it. You're calling him names?

Skyler White: I didn't call him names... I said he was unpleasant.

Walter White: Well, he's not calling you back. I mean, you didn't honestly think that worked.

Skyler White: Yeah, I do.

Walter White: Ahhhh, no way, sorry, no, so it's time to move on, okay? I'm going to call Saul. Where's my phone?

[The phone rings. Walter reaches to pick it up, but Skyler says “no” and holds his hand on the phone.]

Skyler White: Just wait, wait.

Walter White: What for?

Skyler White: Wait, wait.

Walter White: For...Oh my god.

Walter realizes that this is part of Skyler’s negotiation process, making Bogdan wait while the phone rings. She finally picks up the phone and secures the deal for \$800,000. Walter’s continued lack of faith in his wife’s entrepreneurial abilities demonstrates a patriarchal mindset that business strategies and successful negotiation are traditionally masculine spheres of control. Walter’s paternal condescension (“it was a *great* idea,” “you didn’t honestly think that worked,” “it’s time to move on”) underscores Walter’s assumptions. Despite all this, Skyler is successful. She secures a credible business for the purpose of laundering Walter’s money and is even able to get a better price in the process.

Again, as Pierson (2013b) describes, neoliberal conditions have led to an increase in money laundering, a practice that has an affinity with rapid monetary exchanges and established tax haven countries. Pierson does not go into detail about Skyler’s participation in the plan to launder Walter’s money. Her participation demonstrates a cutthroat entrepreneurial approach, which utilizes the illusion of city environmental water violations to secure her deal. Though impersonating a city official is surely illegal, ultimately market logic would dictate that Bogdan is responsible for educating himself about whether or not his business actually violates any regulations. The above storyline demonstrates a moment of incorporation in terms of how

neoliberalism is gendered in *Breaking Bad*. Skyler exhibits much more control and exercises more entrepreneurial qualities than the women of *The Sopranos*.

Gale

Another moment of incorporation in *Breaking Bad* involves the character of Gale Boetticher. Gale is Walter's lab assistant during season three. He was hired by Gustavo Fring to replace Jesse Pinkman as Walter's assistant. Gale has a Master's degree in organic chemistry with a concentration in X-ray crystallography. Gale's is quite different than any other male character on *Breaking Bad*. He is kind and caring. He has puffy, curly hair and is slightly chubby. He can recite Walt Whitman poems by memory. He loves karaoke. He is a vegan and loves to cook. His apartment is filled with items from around the world. He listens and sings along to world music, such as an old Italian swing song called "Crapapelada" (Nardi, 2013). Nardi (2013) explains Gale's character in contrast to the other men of *Breaking Bad*: "Gale, unlike the other characters, is not greedy or aggressive, and he has a keen interest in science, ethnic cultures, literature, and even social anarchism" (p. 183-184). Gale is not a dominant masculine character. While Walter and Gustavo are violent and entrepreneurial, Gale is peaceful and compassionate. He upholds virtues such as friendship, honesty, and humility.

These qualities of Gale are curial for understanding the gender dynamic relative to neoliberalism on *Breaking Bad*. To say that neoliberalism has only dominant masculine connections in the series would miss important moments of incorporation. After Walter and Gale finish their first cook together in "Sunset" (Shiban, 2010; season three, episode six), Gale opens a bottle of wine and pours Walter a glass. Walter decides to ask Gale about his decision to cook methamphetamine as a career.

Walter White: Gale, I'm wondering how you...

Gale Boetticher: Ended up here?

Walter White: Well, actually, I'm still wondering how I ended up here, but, yes. I mean, I can't imagine we strike each other as criminals.

Gale Boetticher: Well, there's crime, and there's *crime*, I suppose. I'm definitely a libertarian. Consenting adults want what they want and if I'm not supplying it, they will get it somewhere else. With me, they're getting exactly they pay for, no added toxins or adulterants.

Here, it would be beneficial to refer back to the study by Pedersen et al. (2015) that found that lower class individuals use methamphetamine to help them work harder for longer hours. Gale's justification about consenting adults obscures the harsh realities of meth users around the world. His rationale leads to the idea that people addicted to methamphetamine *actually want to be drug addicts*. This logic masks the structural and material inequalities that lower class individuals face, which can lead to drug use, such as in the Pedersen et al. study. Gale's identification as a libertarian demonstrates that this logic emerges from liberal political theory that advocates that individuals should have the freedom to do what they like without government intervention, and, ultimately, are responsible for their own safety and self-management.

According to Thorsen and Lie (2006), "Libertarianism is typified by a remorseless concern for liberty above everything else, especially economic or commercial liberty, coupled with a corresponding de-emphasis of other traditional liberal purposes and values such as democracy and social justice" (p. 5). Thus, the core values of neoliberalism and libertarianism are similar. In fact, Freeman's (2001) descriptions of libertarianism are virtually indistinguishable from neoliberalism, except for his observation that "libertarianism" is a popular

political belief in the United States. That is, libertarians, though sharing the same political ideas of neoliberal economics, would never characterize themselves as “neoliberal” or “neoliberalists.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the discourses of white masculinity and neoliberalism in *Breaking Bad* in the following categories: (1) entrepreneurialism; (2) providing for one’s family; (3) technical and scientific solutions. Finally, this chapter detailed moments of incorporation in *Breaking Bad* when the dominant ideology of neoliberalism has shifted to include feminine characterizations as well as subordinate forms of masculinity. The following chapter focuses on sociocultural discourses as they relate to the findings in this chapter and the previous chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: SOCIOCULTURAL DISCOURSES

This chapter analyzes several distinct sociocultural discourses about *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* that focus on morality and neoliberalism. The first section deals with journalistic and academic perspectives on the morality of these shows and critically assesses discourses that praise the “artistic” achievements of ambivalence. The second section demonstrates the blurring lines between businessmen and criminals and the moral implications that follow. The third section discusses a series of business publications’ “how to” articles that extract “lessons” from the two shows and assesses the problematic aspects of these articles. The fourth section explores the discourses about *Breaking Bad* concerning local businesses in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Moral Ambivalence and the So-Called “Golden Age” of Television

Critics call the era from the late 1990s until now a “Golden Age” of television (Martin, 2013; Paskin, 2013). In Paskin’s (2013) words, starting at the turn of the century, audiences made “a collective decision that TV *itself* was worthy—worthy of our leisure time, our attention, our imagination, our conversation, our bingeable hours” (para. 8). The following subsections detail the praise for this so-called “Golden Age” and critique this discourse as a central component to larger neoliberal discourses.

Praise for the “Golden Age”

In a recent interview, Brett Martin, journalist and television critic, explains that the “artistic achievements” of the so-called “Golden Age” of television required the collision of business, technological, and artistic currents (Reese, 2013). In his opinion, the switch from prime time to TV on-demand, through technology like TiVo, DVR, and Netflix, created space for new artistic currents for the medium: “The thing that had ruled television from the time it was born—

the advertiser—and the need for massive ratings no longer is the most important thing. When you take away that, an enormous new universe of artistic possibility opens up” (Martin, quoted in Reese, 2013, para. 5). Similarly, *New York Times* media critic David Carr (2014) claims that the technological advancements in television have “made us the programming masters of our own universes” (para. 5). These devices not only offer increased flexibility, according to these perspectives, but also proliferate consumption, demonstrated by the fact that Americans watched almost 15 hours of on-demand television per month in 2013, which is an increase of two hours a month from the previous year (Carr, 2014). Artistic innovations also helped produce this era of what is perceived as excellent television. Many authors cite *The Sopranos* as the catalyst. Greenwald (2013) explains, “*The Sopranos* proved to be the beginning of what came to be known as a ‘Golden Age’ of television, a twin flowering of creativity and technology that elevated a formerly disrespected medium into a national cultural obsession” (para. 2).

Television and cultural critics regard *The Sopranos* as one of the best and most influential shows in the history of the medium. Nussbaum (2007) explains that since *The Sopranos* premiered, critics have celebrated the show like no other: “It was novelistic (Dickensian!), cinematic (Fellini-esque!), iconic (Is there any other show where most viewers still watch the opening credits?)” (para. 2). Biskind (2007) calls *The Sopranos* “one of the masterpieces of American popular culture, on par with the first two *Godfathers*, *Mean Streets*, and *Goodfellas*” (p. 1). Crosely (2012) argues that the character of Tony Soprano “put a stain on our consciousness harder to remove than blood” (para. 3). Eaton (2012) confesses that after five years since *The Sopranos* ended she misses the characters, especially Tony, whom she considers “an old friend” (p. 281).

The show’s presentation of a morally complex protagonist is cited as one of the reasons

for its success. Martin explains that we tend to forget in a post-*Dexter* and post-*Breaking Bad* television universe that Tony was really controversial at the time: “It went against everything that people thought they knew about television. People would reject a complicated hero in their own houses...you couldn’t have a hero be a killer and be that complicated” (quoted in Reese, 2013, para. 6). *The Sopranos*, then, provided a template for future television shows (Lotz, 2014). Soon American television would present a number of morally complicated and criminal male characters in suspenseful dramas including *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*.

As with *The Sopranos*, moral complexity lies at the heart of *Breaking Bad*, according to critics. This tension is supposedly responsible for *Breaking Bad*’s acclaim. Segal (2011) writes, “As Walter inches toward damnation, Gilligan and his writers have posed some large questions about good and evil, questions with implications for every kind of malefactor you can imagine, from Ponzi schemers to terrorists” (para. 11). Critics claim that *Breaking Bad* suspends audiences on a tightrope during each episode; we fear what will happen and how much worse it will get before the end. “Each new episode arrives,” Nussbaum (2012) writes, “fraught with foreshadowing, with betrayal on the way—we know what has to happen, but not how” (para. 3). Nussbaum (2012) argues that *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* are similar in that they both repeatedly punish the audience for loving a monster.

The Writers Guild of America (2014) ranks *The Sopranos* as the best-written show of all time and *Breaking Bad* as the 13th best. Though both shows are frequently cited in discussions of so-called “excellent” television, critics continue a fierce debate about which is the better show, along with a number of other programs like *The Wire*, *True Detective*, and *Deadwood*. Recently, the online magazine *Vulture* held a bracket competition for the best television drama in the last

25 years (Raftery, 2012), having enlisted a panel of novelists, journalists, actors, and playwrights to decide how the bracket progressed. Out of 16 shows, *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* made it to the semi-finals of the bracket. *Breaking Bad* lost, leaving *The Sopranos* to face *The Wire* in the finals, where the latter won. Crosely (2012) decided the vote between *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* and came to the conclusion that *The Sopranos* won the semifinal because it was more “real” than *Breaking Bad*: “We want a universe we can relate to, even in the form of a fictional show, and even through the eyes of a sociopath. *The Sopranos* does it better...*The Sopranos*, for all its whackings and goombahs, is more real” (para. 19). Corsely’s choice is also reflected in ratings. In 2002, *The Sopranos* had an average gross audience of 18.2 million viewers per episode while *Breaking Bad*’s highest rated episode (the series finale) peaked at 10.3 million viewers (Ebiri, 2013; Hibberd, 2013). These shows both enjoy immense popularity and critical acclaim, with the series’ moral ambivalence consistently hailed as contributing to their overall excellence.

“Rough Heroes”

The era of the antihero: Do you think it’s done? Or is that just the way that great television gets made?

This is a very, very confusing issue for me, because I don’t see Don as an antihero. I think of an antihero—

Is Tony Soprano an antihero?

Yeah. I mean, part of it is you have to murder. So Don is like an everyman to me.

So it’s not about being dark, it’s about being bad.

Give me an example of something where the hero is not dark. The hero *is* an antihero. If the hero is squeaky clean and perfect, you're going to be interested in the villain.

The above exchange is from an interview with Matthew Weiner conducted by Hanna Rosin (2014, p. 3), a reporter for *The Atlantic*. Weiner produced and wrote for the last two seasons of *The Sopranos* and also created the popular television drama *Mad Men*. The interview took place prior to the final season of *Mad Men* and concerns Don Draper, the show's protagonist.

The interview also points to a common misunderstanding of the term "antihero." In cultural discussions about Tony Soprano or Walter White, the term "antihero" is used frequently, and this is misleading (Lotz, 2014). Literary theory qualifies the antihero as an individual who *lacks* the characteristics of traditional heroes such as nobility, courage, honesty, and magnanimity (Lotz, 2014). Eaton (2012) explains that antiheroes are devoid of qualities like conviction, courage, physical prowess, and intelligence, and are often "plagued by human frailties such as weakness, arrogance, cowardice, doubt, envy, indolence, or stupidity" (p. 283). Tony Soprano and Walter White do fit some of the above characteristics of the antihero, but they are certainly not "cowards," "weak," "indolent," or "stupid." Populist academics and TV critics argue that these character differences disqualify Tony and Walter from the realm of the antihero. Eaton (2012, 2013) proposes "rough heroes," a term that emerges out of a current debate in aesthetics concerning morality in art, including television series such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. Hume (1987) originally used the term in the following passage:

We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes: We are displeased to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded. And...we cannot

prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable. (p. 246)

Eaton (2012) develops this term “rough heroes” to argue that characters like Tony Soprano contradict Hume’s observations in distinctive ways, including the fact that rough heroes make audiences feel a deep ambivalence.

The rough hero, as defined by Eaton, is similar to the antihero in that he is a flawed protagonist, but the rough hero’s qualities are resolutely more villainous. “He is usually a sociopath,” writes Eaton, “an outlaw, a murderer, a sex criminal, a sadist, or Satan incarnate” (2012, p. 284). The rough hero is intentionally criminal and lacks remorse for his actions. Audience forgiveness is not prescribed in the rough hero’s narrative; “we are not offered reasons to dismiss his misdeeds as a result of misfortune, weakness, folly, or ignorance” (Eaton, 2012, p. 284). The rough hero’s flaws, however, are often offset by his numerous virtues. The rough hero “can be affectionate, caring, and loyal toward family, friends, children, or animals; he can be suave, charming, and charismatic...he can be highly learned, intelligent, perceptive, and shrewd; he is often witty funny or affable” (Eaton, 2012, p. 285). The rough hero’s villainous traits are also diminished by surrounding characters who embody even more morally abhorrent characteristics, some examples being Ralph Cifaretto in *The Sopranos* and Tuco Salamanca in *Breaking Bad* (Eaton, 2012). Eaton (2013) believes that rough hero narratives not only appeal to audiences with a tendency toward moral ambivalence, but also make it extremely difficult to “distinguish the nonmorally praiseworthy and the morally blameworthy” (p. 377). Ultimately, Eaton (2013) argues that this is an artistic achievement for these shows of the so-called “Golden Age” of television. The dominant theme of this claim, and most praise for *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, centers on the moral ambivalence within these shows.

Criminals in Literature

In assessing the praise heaped upon *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, as well as on the recent “Golden Age” of television more broadly, the first task is to interrogate the artistic achievement of moral ambivalence. Recall Martin’s quote about the path-breaking role of *The Sopranos*: “People would reject a complicated hero in their own houses...you couldn’t have a hero be a killer and be that complicated” (quoted in Reese, 2013, para. 6). The sentiment expressed in this quote, along with the other praise of the moral ambivalence in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, ignores the history of literature. Characters similar to Tony Soprano and Walter White have existed for centuries, as far back as ancient Greek dramas.

Duncan’s (1996) work, *Romantic Outlaws, Beloved Prisons: The Unconscious Meanings of Crime and Punishment*, uses a psychoanalytic framework to assess audiences’ attraction to criminal figures in fiction throughout history. Among them are the criminal protagonists in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*; Fredrich Schiller’s *The Robbers*; John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*; Roger Green’s *The Adventures of Robin Hood*; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*, and *The Black Arrow*; John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*; Sophocles’ *Antigone*; Prosper Merimee’s *Carmen*; Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*; Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*; Colin MacInnes’s *Mr. Love and Justice*; Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Adventure of the Final Problem*; and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

Duncan’s (1996) book attempts to understand why audiences often enjoy, love and admire criminals in spite of their crimes and criminal nature. Claiming that this admiration occurs on an unconscious level, Duncan (1996) argues that audiences crave the freedom associated with criminal activity. This freedom is one *against* the law and above the social

structures of ordinary life, where the criminal can achieve a type of greatness: “Removed from the routinized and benighted domain of ordinary people, criminals lead elevated lives” (Duncan, 1996, p. 93). Duncan describes the criminal as “a dreamer of dreams, as one who aspires to immortality, as a character larger than life...such is the type of admired criminal to be considered first under the rubric of ‘greatness’” (Duncan, 1996, p. 90). Audiences become narcissistically invested in criminals because they “refuse to be limited by the rules and scruples that circumscribe normal lives” (p. 97). Writing specifically about *Crime and Punishment*, Duncan (1996) explains that even the characters in the novel who represent the state admire Raskolnikov’s “greatness,” a quality that transcends that of ordinary men.

Duncan (1996) provides insight into why audiences would admire characters like Tony Soprano and Walter White. These men live fantasy lives, largely unrestricted by laws and other social structures. To demonstrate the similarities between literary characters from the past and their similarity to Tony and Walter, I cite a description of Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* that, in effect, could be describing Walter White:

Raskolnikov, the principal character of *Crime and Punishment*, is...a great sufferer. He suffers both before he commits the murder and after...Before he suffers from the mediocrity of his life and is consumed by a desire to change it. His pride and ambition have persuaded him that he must not tread the beaten road of limited opportunities but emerge from the mass of common men by means of a daring act. Such an act will of necessity violate the law that governs common men; he tells himself that he has a right to do that because he is not one of them. Deep down in his inner realm a doubt arises whether he is really one of those who have a right to commit such a wanton act. To silence this doubt he commits the crime. (Strem, 1957, p. 17)

Despite the similarities here, the new criminals of the so-called “Golden Age” of television represent something completely different from Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, a difference not due to the texts of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, but rather to the neoliberal context and associated discourses surrounding these shows.

Duncan (1996) repeats throughout her book that audience attraction to criminal behavior operates on an unconscious level: “It is important to stress that...the gratification received from the criminal acts is truly *unconscious*; it is not accessible to awareness” (p. 81). The point of departure, then, is the nature of audience awareness about attraction to Tony and Walter. The praise for the moral ambiguity of these television shows indicates that critics, journalistic and academic alike, are certainly aware of the gratifications that audiences receive from viewing Tony and Walter. Sympathy for criminals and villains is not a new condition created by *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. What is new, however, is the concept of moral ambiguity surrounding (fictional) criminals and villains, who may now be described using the kinder and much more confusing title of “rough heroes.”

Academics claim that Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment* to warn of the social, academic, and technical achievements of modernity that would create circumstances where man would substitute himself for God (Strem, 1957). There is no such “moral ambiguity” in the critical evaluations of this story; instead, *Crime and Punishment* is largely seen as supporting the religious values of nonviolence and love for fellow man (Strem, 1957). Is it even possible to imagine such praise for *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*? Instead, contemporary critics argue that characters like Tony and Walter support “moral depravity by rendering it sympathetic, likeable, praiseworthy, and glamorous” (Eaton, 2013, p. 287). Again, I suggest that this type of praise has little to do with the artistic achievements or innovations of these stories and much

more to do with the surrounding neoliberal context, in which morality for violent criminals is characterized as flexible.

Other cultural artifacts similar to *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* demonstrate a comparable glamorization of moral depravity, one which reflects certain attributes of neoliberalism. The *Grand Theft Auto* [*GTA*] video game series allows players to enter a world that centers on crime, violence, and profit making. Barrett (2006) calls the game a “neoliberal fantasy” that neutralizes, justifies, and reinforces “neoliberal policies that divest power from politics and collapse public concerns into private worries” (p. 95). One way that *GTA* reinforces the values of neoliberalism is by the absence of the collective attributes of society: “There are no democratic representatives, schools, community centers, city halls, civic buildings, or anything remotely resembling a democratic public state” (Barrett, 2006, p. 105). Instead, power operates in the game through the market and the capacity of the individual to commit violence and accumulate wealth, characteristics that are causally linked in gameplay (Barrett, 2006). Individual acts of self-justified violence and profitmaking become the only way for players to exert agency in *GTA*, and this reinforces a culture of cynicism toward collective democratic solutions (Barrett, 2006). Morality in *GTA* is secondary to the accumulation of wealth through violence, as evidenced by the fact that to advance in the game—to win—a player must commit violence to gain profit. Though *GTA* has critical potential to demonstrate rebellion, the quality of resistance in the game takes the form of the neoliberal contest of “man against the state” (Sawer, 1996, p. 132), instead of collective rebellion, non-violent protest, or any other manifestation of radical social justice actions.

The Liquid Morality of Neoliberalism

Drawing on Bauman's (2000; 2008) concept of "liquid modernity"—a period defined by "flexible norms and floating values" (p. 209), Nardi (2013) argues that *Breaking Bad* creates "liquid identification" for viewers, a state in which they must constantly renegotiate their own identification with a morally compromised character. Adding to that concept the contextual features of neoliberalism, I offer the phrase "liquid morality of neoliberalism" to specifically refer to a central characteristic of contemporary popular media characters who blur morality in pursuit of profits through violence, such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *GTA*. The flexibility central to the "artistic achievement" of moral ambivalence of the so-called "Golden Age" of television is particularly suited to the proliferation of neoliberal logic. Flexibility is a key component of neoliberal markets (Harvey, 2007) and the post-Fordist "flexible specialization" of production (Barker, 2004). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, another modern achievement lauded for having spurred the so-called "Golden Age" of television is flexible technology. Williams (2003) claims that new technology is a product of shifts in economic and social power structures that create new needs for technology to fill. The flexible nature of neoliberalism permeates the production and consumption of contemporary television, but it also influences the *content* of popular television shows, and therefore critics' moral stances toward that content, as the previous textual analysis demonstrates.

A central aspect to critically evaluating journalistic and academic praise for the moral ambivalence of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* is the understanding that these "rough heroes" are strictly white men. The discourses celebrating these shows' "artistic achievements" overlook the identity politics embedded in the characterizations of Tony and Walter that support larger economic, gender, and racial oppression. *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* naturalize white crime

and amorality, supporting a culture where moral depravity and crime is socially tolerated when white men engage in this behavior. The liquid morality of neoliberalism, then, is appropriate and applied to circumstances that involve the dominant class characteristics and identities of white men. The unique tolerance for Tony and Walter as “rough heroes” is extended to them under the rubric of white privilege and a central feature of that extension involves their managerial and entrepreneurial success.

Criminal Businessmen

Levine and Rubinstein (2013) conducted a study that looked at the personality traits of the most successful entrepreneurs. They found that those who develop and run incorporated businesses that attract investment are disproportionately white, male, and highly educated (Levine & Rubinstein, 2013). Also, and perhaps most interesting, they found that such white entrepreneurs were far more likely than salaried employees or the unincorporated self-employed to engage in “aggressive, illicit, risk-taking activities” (p. 20), such as smoking marijuana, shoplifting, drug dealing, robbery, assault and gambling. These entrepreneurs were also more likely to “use force to obtain things” (Levine & Rubinstein, 2013, p. 20). Overall, the best predictors of entrepreneurial success were high learning aptitude and the tendency to break the rules: “It is a particular mixture of traits that seems to matter for both becoming an entrepreneur and succeeding as an entrepreneur. It is the high-ability person who tends to ‘break-the-rules’ as a youth who is especially likely to become a successful entrepreneur” (Levine & Rubinstein, 2013, p. 40). Establishing connections among crime, whiteness, entrepreneurialism, and masculinity is not a common goal for contemporary researchers, but it holds particular importance for the current project, which links two popular television shows about male criminals to the context of neoliberalism.

Masculinity, Managers, and Crime

Messerschmidt (2014) offers a compelling theory of criminology that serves to bridge the gaps between neoliberalism, crime, and hegemonic masculinity, using structured action theory to explain why some men commit crimes while others do not. Structured action theory emphasizes the construction of sex, gender, and sexuality as “situated structured action,” meaning that these social identifiers grow out of continued social practice that reproduces and re-emphasizes the characteristics of identity (pp. 22-23). Doing gender, for example, is a continuing process, involving the construction of embodied presentations and practices that suggest a particular gender in particular settings. These embodied practices and presentations, then, construct a “social structure,” defined as

regular and patterned forms of interaction over time that constrain and channel behavior in specific ways...Social actors perpetuate and transform social structures within the same interaction; simultaneously these structures constrain and enable gendered and sexual social action. The result is an ongoing social construction of gender and sexual relations. (2014, p. 24)

Power plays a crucial role in structured action theory. Power relations among men and women are constructed historically, so in specific contexts some men and women possess greater power than others, while some sexualities have greater power than other sexualities (Messerschmidt, 2014). As a consequence, heterosexual men and women wield power over sexual minorities, and white men and women wield power over racial-minority men and women (Messerschmidt, 2014). Importantly, Messerschmidt sees gender, race, class, and sexuality not as absolutes in every social setting, but as constantly intersecting in different ways depending on situational contexts. Thus, to understand crime, “we must appreciate how structure and action are

woven inextricably into the ongoing reflexive activities of ‘doing’ embodied gender, race, class, and sexual practices” (2014, p. 36). This approach to criminology appears in a number of case studies that Messerschmidt presents.

One such study involves an investigation of the intersection of crime, gender, race, and class within the context of the *Challenger* space shuttle in 1986. *Challenger* exploded in midair, killing all seven members, due to a malfunction in the space shuttle’s O-rings. The crime in this case was the flawed decision at the managerial level to launch the space shuttle. Messerschmidt (2014) describes the corporate managers in this case as embodying the characteristics of “rationality, instrumentalism, careerism, decisiveness, productivism, and risk taking” (p. 85). Exemplifying these characteristics is often referred to as “entrepreneurialism,” which involves “prioritizing performance levels and budget targets, elevating efficiency and managerial control at the expense of all other criteria, and being entangled in the struggle to be constantly productive and achieving. The entrepreneur is one who manages with considerable risk” (Messerschmidt, 2014, p. 85). Corporate management strategies often depend on the ability to take risks to meet corporate goals, even if human life is at stake. Messerschmidt (2014) argues that the dominant forms of masculinity performed by the corporate managers to push through *Challenger*’s launch led to the explosion. This case study, then, shows how the overlapping characteristics of masculinity and entrepreneurship interact with (im)morality, leading to the unnecessary death of *Challenger*’s seven crewmembers.

Because threats to profit making are concurrent threats to corporate-manager masculine accomplishment, risk taking is an acceptable means of resolving both problems: risk taking is a resource in this particular setting for accomplishing profit (class) and masculinity (gender) and therefore merging into one entity. (Messerschmidt, 2014, p. 87)

Messerschmidt (2014) calls his *Challenger* case study *Murderous Managers* as it shows the overlapping characteristics of masculinity and neoliberalism, specifically as applied to criminals.

These connections, between entrepreneurialism and criminality, also have a moral dimension. The risk/benefit calculation, prioritizing profit-making over human life, illustrates the liquid morality of neoliberalism and relates significantly to the narratives of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, as the previous textual analysis demonstrates.

“Business Lessons” From Tony and Walter

In addition to all the critical claim *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* have amassed, they have also spawned a rather unexpected and even bizarre subcategory of business journalism: how-to columns that take (and pass along) lessons from Walter and Tony’s unscrupulous behaviors and turn them into tips for reader on how to succeed in business. “Business tips” and “business lessons” inspired by Tony Soprano and Walter White that writers from *Forbes* and other business news magazines suggest to their readers further illustrate the connection between entrepreneurialism and criminality and the broader societal acceptance and endorsement of this connection. This discourse obscures the criminal and amoral nature of these men and demonstrates the liquid morality of neoliberalism.

Tony

Writing for *Business Know How*, Spiegel (n. d.) argues that Tony Soprano “demonstrates successful methods for leading a team and forging beneficial, productive long-term relationships” (para. 2). He suggests that burgeoning entrepreneurs should exhibit confidence like Tony: “When in doubt, assert yourself...even in his uncertainty, [Tony] forges ahead with bold action. He proudly claims that more is lost by indecision than by wrong choices” (Spiegel, n. d., para. 3). Another tip, according to Spiegel (n. d.) is “deny everything,” he writes, “Tony

has perfected his ability to deny his misdeeds with powerfully convincing indignation. Though the tactic doesn't work in all cases, it works often enough to keep it in the management tool box" (para. 11). Ending with the claim that Tony Soprano's management strategies are "undeniable" and created a "multi-million dollar enterprise," Spiegel (n. d.) encourages readers to try these tactics out in their own businesses. Readers learn from this article that it is better for successful entrepreneurs to make wrong decisions than no decision and that, at times, one must lie about misdeeds when necessary.

Gaddis (2013) from *Forbes* starts her article, entitled "Insights from Tony Soprano," with the recognition that she and Tony Soprano "shared the same level of responsibility" (para. 1). Gaddis (2013) states plainly, "Tony was an entrepreneur. He provided jobs for people, mainly family and friends...he was helping put food on the table. He demanded loyalty from them. He tried to provide an overarching sense of family" (para. 3). She draws parallels between Tony's volatile changes from violent behavior to caring leadership to her own business life:

He could switch from a belligerent, violent gang leader to a docile, vulnerable character.

Through my career I have had to stand strong and make tough decisions that were ultimately for the good of the whole, but seemed harsh on a given day. (Gaddis, 2013, para. 3)

Tony Soprano, a man who has never been to business school, clearly can inspire the business world through violence, which for Gaddis seems to symbolize leadership strength. Another *Forbes* writer, Satell (2015), draws similar inspiration from Tony. He writes, "Tony...was a master of coercion. Through violence, extortion and bribery he became a paragon of his industry, outperforming his competitors and enriching himself and his associates" (Satell, 2015, para. 1).

This discourse distinctly links violence and success in business. For those in the business world, the ends justify the means when it comes to *The Sopranos*.

Patel (2007) offers an article called, “Tony Soprano’s top 11 tips for success.” According to his website, Patel (2007) is an online marketer, who helps companies like Amazon, NBC, HP and Viacom grow their revenues. His website also features the following boast: “*The Wall Street Journal* calls him a top influence on the web, *Forbes* says he is one of the top 10 online marketers, and *Entrepreneur Magazine* says he created one of the 100 most brilliant companies in the world.” His article suggests a number of business tips that readers could learn from Tony Soprano. He writes, “Don’t let anything stand in your way—if you want to be successful then you have to do whatever it takes to obtain your goal” (Patel, 2007, para. 2). He tells readers to

Gain a backbone—if you don’t stand up for yourself people will just walk all over you. If you let people walk all over you it will not stop and it will not get you where you want to be in life. (Patel, 2007, para. 9)

Finally, Patel (2007) tells readers “If you want, then earn it—don’t expect things to be handed to you in life... These days the up and coming millionaires aren’t having it all handed to them, but instead are working hard for it” (para. 10). Here, the message to future corporate leaders is to do whatever it takes to be successful and stand up for yourself, like Tony Soprano. The last tip suggests that people should “earn it” like Tony Soprano, who is portrayed as a hard worker despite the fact that his success is premised on usury, illegal exploitation, and violence. This, apparently, is hard work.

Fisher (2013) provides an article called “A wrong decision is better than indecision: Eight leadership lessons from Tony Soprano.” “It should not come as any real surprise,” writes Fisher (2013), that Tony Soprano is remembered as “a role model for corporate leaders” (para. 6). Some

leadership lessons Fisher learned from Tony include “constantly making decisions, solving problems, assessing risk and responding to opportunity” (para. 11). Fisher also reminds readers:

Some decisions are unpleasant, but they are also necessary... Whether it’s rebuking or sacking an incompetent manager, or closing down a division that is not performing, chief executives who avoid unpleasant decisions will render themselves incapable of doing their job. (2013, para. 12)

Fisher (2013) ends with the statement that “Tony Soprano will continue to live on in the hearts and minds of fans—and hopefully a few business schools too” (para. 17). Here again, Tony is a model leader that can make the tough decisions required in the business world.

If the previous lessons and lists do not satisfy readers who want to learn how to run a business like Tony Soprano, there are two books that go into detail about these strategies:

Leadership Sopranos Style: How to Become a More Effective Boss and *Tony Soprano on Management: Leadership Lessons Inspired by America’s Favorite Mobster*. The first, written by Himsel (2003), argues that Tony is “a remarkably effective, empathetic boss who can teach MBAs a thing or two about leadership” (p. xv). One example from the book emphasizes Tony’s decision making: “Tony provides us with a valuable decision-making model... By examining the ten most difficult decisions... we can learn a lot about everything from generating alternatives to acting quickly and effectively when faced with ambiguous situations” (Himsel, 2003, p. 126).

Number 9 on this list is “Whether to Clip Carmine,” and the description reads:

In the world of business, this is akin to angling for your boss’s job or beating out a fellow executive for a top position. The rewards are great if you go for it, but so are the risks if you fail. (Himsel, 2003, p. 126)

Similar to the former articles, Himsel (2003) sees the violence in *The Sopranos* as a metaphor for the world of business.

Tony Soprano on Management: Leadership Lessons Inspired by America's Favorite Mobster by Schneider (2004) also argues that future leaders can learn from Tony. He writes,

In an age of economic uncertainty, corporate turmoil, anxiety and downsizing, leaders are being forced to work with speed with different methods, new systems and shifting teams...Business are moving faster, and jobs, companies, products and services are changing more rapidly than ever before...Leaders must step up and steer new courses to get their companies back on track and regain public confidence. They must adapt to meet the challenges of today's business environment. And Tony Soprano is the surprising role model for this new breed of leader. His methods may appear unconventional, but we can all learn strategies and tactics from the way he manages people, resolves conflict, negotiates and leads. (p. xii)

I quote Schneider at length because he touches on conditions of neoliberalism in the first few sentences. His plan for the changing economic context: be more like Tony. The introduction of his book offers a guarantee for the Soprano student:

The Tony Soprano approach stresses structure, hierarchy and values. There are no metrics or paradigms, no management goals or rubrics, only results. He doesn't go in for peer reviews or stock options, just a slap on the back at the Bada Bing and an envelope full of cash. (Schneider, 2004, p. xiii)

According to this perspective, the business world has become too complicated—why not take a few lessons from the simpler world of fictional organized crime? If readers have forgotten, the Bada Bing is the strip club where Tony frequently handles business. It is also a place where Tony

mercilessly beats his employees, strippers are killed, prostitution is commonplace, criminal activity takes place, and women are objectified.

Leadership Sopranos Style retails for \$58.77 and *Tony Soprano on Management* for \$58.31. If audiences learn any lessons about nonviolence and loving one another from *The Sopranos* it is not from the two books or online advice lists. Instead, these perspectives emphasize the liquid morality of neoliberalism that places profit making and success over all else. Recall that McChensey (2008) defines neoliberalism as “the doctrine that profits should rule as much of social life as possible, and any that get in the way of profit making are suspect, if not condemned” (p. 15). Thus, even if audiences could learn to love each other and lessons of nonviolence from watching *The Sopranos*—how not to act from a criminal and sociopath—what’s the point when they could instead learn how to make more money?

Walter

Gasca (2014) writes in *Entrepreneur* magazine that readers can “learn a great deal about business from Walter White” (para. 5). His article argues that Walter approached the meth business as “any other entrepreneur might approach producing a consumable good” and he succeeded because he was “incredibly detail oriented, stuck to schedules and processes, and treated his team like his family” (para. 5). Not only did Walter stay on task like a businessman should, but he also was a “branding genius,” who could teach future entrepreneurs important lessons about branding (para. 6). If readers feel concerned about taking tips from a man like Walter White, Gasca reminds them that they “need not feel guilty” (para. 12). What’s communicated here is that readers should overlook the morally compromised character in favor of learning to be better at branding and business overall.

Another writer at *Entrepreneur*, Eha (2014), offers a list of Walter's five best business moves. The first is "Walt intimidates Tuco," and the description reads:

Walt detonates a chunk of fulminated mercury...blowing out the top floor of the drug dealer's headquarters. Impressed as much by Walt's "balls" as by his high quality product, Tuco agrees to buy two pounds of meth a week from Walt and Jesse. (Eha, 2014, para. 5)

According to Eha, the lesson from the above situation in *Breaking Bad* is "don't take no for an answer" (para. 5). An additional tip from Eha's list includes descriptions of Walter building the bomb that killed Gustavo, which apparently is a metaphor for staying ahead of competition and eliminating rivals "before they eliminate you" (para. 16). Finally, Eha praises Walter's comment to Jesse, "I'm in the empire business," which teaches readers to "Decide what business you want to be in. And don't let anyone stand in your way as you move forward" (para. 19). These publications describe Walter as the ideal businessman with the right "moves" that help him succeed as an entrepreneur.

Solomon (2012), at *Forbes*, provides a list of "7 Career Lessons from Breaking Bad's Walter White." Solomon (2012) claims that Walter is an "example for anyone looking to strike out on their own and build their own business—or simply survive and advance within their current company" (p. 1). He tells readers that they are living in a "golden age of entrepreneurship," but to succeed they must utilize "specialized skills" like Walter in order to reap the benefits (p. 1). These specialized skills must make future businessmen indispensable at the work place, meaning that their skill set should make it difficult for future employers to find replacements for their position. Solomon (2012) writes that Walter moved "quickly to identify and eliminate potential replacements," by having Gale Boetticher killed. The article also

compares Walter to Steve Jobs, the late cofounder and CEO of Apple Inc., because Walter is not satisfied unless he produces “the best” product: “Jobs didn’t work for ‘good enough’ at Apple. That’s one of the main reasons why his computers (and now phones and tablets) became must-have items. White is the same way” (Solomon, 2012, p. 1). Another “career lesson” advises readers to learn from Walter’s reputation, which is

that of a master chemist and ruthless drug lord. Throughout Albuquerque, other dealers...learn about this mysterious Heisenberg. They either want to work with him or get out of his way—and both serve to help White get ahead. Make sure your reputation is as sturdy as White’s. (Solomon, 2012, p. 2)

As motioned in the previous chapters, Walter’s violent reputation is a key component of his success as a criminal entrepreneur, and from Solomon’s perspective (2012) there is an important career lesson here for future corporate leaders. Finally, Solomon (2012) tells readers that sometimes they must “do the dirty job”; as he writes, “there’s plenty of dirty work to be done in a business, and if you want it done well, maybe you should take the lead” (p. 2). The article ends with the following statement: “Not many people would be willing to lie, cheat, poison, steal, and kill to advance their career—and that’s definitely a good thing. But not everyone can be Walter White” (Solomon, 2012, p. 2). This quote makes it clear that using violence as a means to advance business ambitions is not a good thing, but the last statement seems to indicate that those who are successful are willing to do equivalent things to get ahead.

Cuffin (2013), a writer at *Elite Daily*, offers 10 lessons from *Breaking Bad* that could help readers run a business. Her article claims that both Jesse and Walter meet the criteria for entrepreneurs: “When it comes to running a business, there are a lot of things that we have learned from the show. Their hard work and dedication can be matched by few and it is what

differentiated them” (Cuffin, 2013, para. 3). Similar to the authors of the previous articles, Cuffin credits Walter’s specialized skill set with having created “the best” product for his clientele. The article also claims that Walter and Jesse “had a knack for making things happen...in high pressure situations they were able to beat out the obstacles and provide their services” (Cuffin, 2013, para. 17). Cuffin’s (2013) article concludes that “Walter and Jesse not only provided a great product, but they made sure their product reached their customers’ hands without issues” (para. 18). Here, the business elements of *Breaking Bad* seem to obscure the fact that Walter and Jesse’s product is illegal, dangerous, highly addictive, and exploits lower-class drug users. It also obscures the fact that Walter and Jesse *did face issues* getting their product to customers such as murder, violence, deceit, and theft.

Finally, Tweney (2013) provides the most startling suggestion that *Breaking Bad* can teach readers about business. Writing for *Venture Beat*, Tweney’s (2013) article is called “Business Lessons from Everyone’s Favorite Meth Cook, Walter White.” The article opens with the following: “You really want to succeed as an entrepreneur? Consider these lessons from Heisenberg College” (Tweney, 2013, para. 4). The first lesson, according to Tweney (2013), is “Nothing is more important than money.” As he writes: “If you really want to succeed, you have to prioritize making money. Everything else is secondary” (para. 7-8). The second lesson in the article is, “Lie to your family to protect them...Even family is secondary to the mission of making money. Don’t let your wife or children get in the way of your dreams of becoming success in business” (Tweney, 2013, para. 10-11). Similar to previous articles, the third lesson references Walter’s indispensability: “If you’re good enough, you can get away with murder...Find a skill that is so rare and so valuable that you can’t be fired, because to fire you

would cause irreparable damage to your company” (Tweney, 2013, para. 12-14). Again, the comparison between Walter and Steve Jobs occurs in this article in the fourth lesson:

If you are ruthless, you can build an empire... You can be the boss too, but you have to take out your current boss—and maybe your partners. Don’t worry: Do you think Steve Jobs hesitated about discarding Nolan Bushnell, Mike Markkula, or Steve Wozniak once they were no longer useful to him? (Tweney, 2013, para. 15-18)

Here, building an empire is upheld as the ultimate goal, regardless of the means to achieve this end. Tweney (2013) tells readers in the sixth lesson that “you pretty much have to kill everyone to survive” and argues that Walter White’s actions throughout *Breaking Bad* were “always justified,” so the lesson is: “You have to be willing to take out anyone who could threaten your success” (para. 18-20). Finally, returning to the priority of making money, Tweney (2013) gives his final lesson to readers: “You always need more money” (para. 23). Though this article may seem tongue-in-cheek, and it may be taken as such by certain readers, there is no evidence that Tweney means this to be satire or criticism; the violent, criminal storyline is very much a metaphor for success in business for this author.

The previous examples that offer “business lessons” from Tony Soprano and Walter White demonstrate the blurring lines between white criminals and businessmen. These perspectives also support the liquid morality of neoliberalism. How did the idea of the successful entrepreneur become so aggressive that brutal fictional criminals become models for future corporate leaders? Of course, not all businessmen and women look to Tony and Walter for lessons on leadership and management, but it is striking that this discourse *even exists* and that these perspectives are published online in magazines like *Forbes* and *Entrepreneur*. Ultimately, these examples demonstrate that a significant portion of the sociocultural discourse surrounding

these texts prioritizes the goals of making profit. These examples also demonstrate the intersectionality of whiteness, criminality, entrepreneurialism and gender in relation to social power and privilege. Tony and Walter are welcomed into the sphere of entrepreneurialism, despite their moral depravity and criminality, because they are white men. Whiteness and maleness allow for these characters to permeate and transgress legal and ethical boundaries and win labels of “artistic achievements” and corporate inspiration.

Inspired Businesses

The following section describes discourses about businesses that take inspiration from *Breaking Bad*. Because I wrote this thesis shortly after *Breaking Bad* stopped airing (2008-2013) and while living in the city (Albuquerque, NM) where the show was produced and its story was set, I was able to see evidence of local businesses profiting from the series. Unfortunately, I did not start this project in 1999 in New Jersey, so I was unable to see any parallel local responses to *The Sopranos*. Thus, this section primarily focuses on discourses about businesses in Albuquerque that seek to profit from *Breaking Bad* and encourage consumption.

Rebel Donut

Rebel Donut is a small local artisan bakery chain located in Albuquerque. In 2012, co-owner Carrie Mettling created the *Breaking Bad* themed “Blue Sky” doughnut (Martin, 2013). The pastry is covered in blue frosting and sprinkled with blue rock candy designed to look like Walter White’s signature methamphetamine. Mettling created the doughnut as a gift to *Breaking Bad* actor Aaron Paul, who played Jesse Pinkman, Walter’s accomplice in the series. Paul is featured on Rebel Donut’s website and Facebook page holding a box of the “Blue Sky” doughnuts (“Home,” 2014; Martin, 2013). Before the premiere of the fifth season of *Breaking Bad*, fans purchased 1,500 dozen doughnuts, resulting in an estimated \$10,000 profit for the

business (Gaynor, 2013; Martin, 2013). During the year in which the fifth season aired, Rebel Donut usually sold six dozen “Blue Sky” donuts on weekdays, and forty dozen on the Sundays when *Breaking Bad* was broadcast (Martin, 2013). One of Rebel Donut’s locations is inside the building that doubled as the Drug Enforcement Administration’s office on *Breaking Bad*; as Mettling recalls, “I thought it would be funny to sell blue-meth doughnuts in the D.E.A. building” (Martin, 2013, para. 22).

The Candy Lady

The Candy Lady is a candy shop located in Albuquerque’s Old Town plaza. Owner Debbie Ball made the rock candy that was used for Walter White’s blue meth during two seasons of the show, and she now sells replicas at her shop in “dollar dime bags” (Gaynor, 2013). Ball reports that she has sold between 35,000 and 40,000 bags of her blue meth rock candy since August 2012 (Gaynor, 2013; Martin, 2013). She also sells hand-painted Pez dispensers depicting some of the show’s characters (Martin, 2013). Ball claimed a 25-percent increase in her *Breaking Bad* products and a ten-percent increase in overall sales between season four and season five of the series (Martin, 2013). Additionally, Ball runs a limousine tour for fans that travels to different locations from the program, including Walter White’s house (Gaynor, 2013). Ball told reporters that “it’s like Christmas every day” because “[i]t’s basically another business that’s been spawned out of [*Breaking Bad*]” (Martin, 2013, para. 19-20). Using a drug reference specifically to refer to the profit generated from her *Breaking Bad* products, Ball said: “The business is not going to go away just because the show has ended. There’s too many fans, and it’s not going to stop any time soon. I’m going to continue to deal” (Gaynor, 2013, para. 18).

Bathing Bad

In 2012, the co-owners of Great Face & Body, a local store selling spa products, created a blue bath salt designed to look like Walter White's methamphetamine (Kelly, 2013). Owners Keith and Andre West-Harrison were able to sell twelve bags before they even had a recipe (Kelly, 2013). Using a cement mixer, they process fifty pounds of Bathing Bad Bath Salt at a time and sell the product in eight-ounce baggies across the United States and in 19 countries internationally (Gaynor, 2013; Kelly 2013). "Business now is crazy good," said Keith, who told reporters that Bathing Bad Bath Salts helped start Great Face & Body because the profits made from the salts helped renovate a new building for the burgeoning business (Gaynor, 2013, para. 8). The Great Face & Body website also tells this story: "Bathing Bad is what happens when two fans of *Breaking Bad* buy a 9,000 sq ft building that had been vacant for 10 years. They needed major money to renovate and asked themselves 'What Would Walter White Do?'" ("Bathing Bad," 2014, para. 4).

Keith and Andre West-Harrison offer classes for fans to learn how to make blue rock candy, similar to the product that The Candy Lady sells. The website for the classes reads: "Our unique cooking class makes you a certified BrBa Cookologist™ and to prove it you can have your mug shot taken holding the certificate. Our team of Professional Cooks are refreshing, funny and knowledgeable on all things Breaking Bad" ("The BaD Cooking Class," 2014, para. 3). The page continues: "Our 'meth' lab has limited seating space. You'll learn the intricate details of how a cook in an RV is different from the super-lab and even a termite tented house. You'll leave with your own bag of candy and a bag of our Bathing Bad Bath Salts" ("The BaD Cooking Class," 2014, para. 4). Fortunately, the page guarantees the class "is legal so you won't ever have to hear 'Better Call Saul!'" ("The BaD Cooking Class," 2014, para. 4). According to

reports, Keith and Andre have only received one email complaint telling them that if they knew what methamphetamine actually did to families of users they would never want to sell these products (Kelly, 2013). In response, Keith told reporters “But real meth isn’t even blue. I know what meth looks like, and that’s not it” (Kelly, 2013, para. 25-26).

***Breaking Bad* and Toys “R” Us**

Breaking Bad’s commodification has also reached national levels, but some companies are grappling with whether or not to sell the drug-business-themed toys. Recently the national toy store chain Toys “R” Us decided to pull its *Breaking Bad* adult collectables because of an online petition started by a Florida mother named Susan Schrijver (Leopold, 2014). The petition received more than 9,000 signatures before Toys “R” Us responded (Leopold, 2012). Schrijver told reporters that though she acknowledges that the store sells toys for all ages, “their decision to sell a *Breaking Bad* doll, complete with a detachable sack of cash and a bag of meth, alongside children’s toys is a dangerous deviation from their family friendly values” (Leopold, 2014, para. 5).

In response to Toys “R” Us’s resolution not to carry the *Breaking Bad* action figures, Aaron Paul, the actor who played Jesse Pinkman, sent out a series of critical tweets. He wrote, “Wait, so @ToysRUs pulled all of the *Breaking Bad* figures from their shelves and still sells Barbie? Hmmmm...I wonder what is more damaging?” (Leopold, 2014, para. 12). Another tweet followed: “And what about all of the violent video games you sell @ToysRUs? Do you still sell those? Florida mom really messed it up for everyone” (Leopold, 2014, para. 12). Bryan Cranston, the actor who plays Walter White, also voiced his discontent in two mocking tweets: “‘Florida mom petitions against Toys ‘R’ Us over *Breaking Bad* action figures.’ I’m so mad, I’m burning my Florida Mom action figure in protest” (Leopold, 2014, para. 14). He followed with:

“Toys R Us puts Breaking Bad toys on ‘indefinite sabbatical.’ Word on the street is that they were sent to Belize. Nicely played Florida Mom” (Leopold, 2014, para. 16).

The debate spawned its own counter-petition designed to encourage Toys “R” Us to carry the toys again. Daniel Pickett, a fan of the show from Massachusetts, organized the petition on Change.org, which at the time of this writing (May 2015) boasts 63,911 signatures. In the description of the petition, Pickett (2014) specifically argues that parents should be the ones responsible for monitoring what toys kids buy:

PARENTS should be the one dictating what their kids watch, buy, read, play and consume, NOT the buyers or employees of Toys R Us. If you don't want to be “forced to explain why a certain toy comes with a bag of highly dangerous and illegal drugs or why someone who sells those drugs deserves to be made into an action figure” then simply don’t walk your kid down that aisle. Problem solved. I'm a parent of a school aged child myself, but I'm an informed, responsible parent and I closely monitor the toys, TV, music, movies and games that my daughter sees. That's my job, and I take it seriously. (para. 3)

Toys “R” Us has not responded to the counter-petition yet, despite its overwhelming support compared to the initial petition to remove the toys.

What’s so striking about this debate is that the rebellion and iconoclastic characterization of Walter and Jesse in the narrative of *Breaking Bad* has been translated to a real life scenario. Here, Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul resume their roles as Walter and Jesse to mock and deride Toys “R” Us and Susan Schrijver for pulling the *Breaking Bad* action figures. Furthermore, the counter-petition acutely speaks to the neoliberal principles of personal responsibility and accountability, while condemning intervention into free market trade. This counter-petition has

less to do with the freedom of speech or censorship than the “right” for businesses to sell whatever consumers want. The logic of this argument, of course, is congruent with the values championed in the narrative of *Breaking Bad*. Recall Gale Boetticher’s remark to Walter after they finished a batch of methamphetamine: “I’m definitely a libertarian. Consenting adults want what they want, and if I’m not supplying it, they will get it somewhere else.” The moral problem of selling a drug dealer figurine at a toy store is superseded by the “right” for Toys “R” Us to sell it, according to the counter-petition, as well as the “right” for individuals to consume whatever they please.

These incidents illustrate the power of “paratexts,” texts that are in some way related to, adjacent to, or appearing beside another text (Gray, 2010). Paratexts of media texts such as television series include spin-offs, toys, clothing, merchandise, or any other texts or products created for the sake of promotion or audience participation. Gray (2010) argues that paratexts are intrinsically linked to texts and provide a space for audience participation and creativity; cultural studies approaches to the topic, therefore, must look beyond the political economy of merchandising and promotion to see how audiences participate and add onto textual narratives.

The current project is not intended to discredit the important, productive research on fans and participatory culture. However, I suggest that the examples discussed in this chapter emphasize the liquid morality of neoliberalism that permeates sociocultural discourses surrounding *Breaking Bad* because they are based centrally in consumerism and profit making. Although the premise of *Breaking Bad* sets the stage for a critique of American economic and healthcare conditions, the various *Breaking Bad*-themed businesses discussed above circumvent these political problems and focus on the potential profits generated from the popularity of the series. Is it possible to imagine *Breaking Bad* fans donating to organizations that help

methamphetamine addicts, lung cancer patients, or even public high school teachers? Though a fan buying a bag of rock candy in the style of Walter's methamphetamine could certainly be said to be "active" or performing "agency," is this agency creating better material consequences for working class drug addicts or struggling high school teachers?

Referencing participatory culture specifically, Jenkins (2012), states, "Nobody regards these fan activities as a magical cure for the social ills of post-industrial capitalism. They are no substitution for meaningful change" (p. 104). What would it look like if fan culture promoted meaningful change? Is it possible for popular culture texts like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* to be ethically and socially responsible without boring audiences?

Duncombe's (2007) book *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* makes the case for a new political strategy for leftist politics: to embrace spectacle, fantasy, and dreams. In his view, progressive politics should take lessons from the city of Las Vegas, *Grand Theft Auto*, celebrities, and consumer culture. He writes,

Progressives should have learned to build a politics that embraces the dreams of people and fashions spectacles which give these fantasies form—a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories. In brief, we should have learned to manufacture *dissent*.

(Duncombe, 2007, p. 9)

His chapter on *GTA* recognizes the critical potential of the game because it appeals to the desire for rebellion, but it is not a progressive or ethical rebellion. "Perhaps one of the reasons progressives are not winning much these days" writes Duncombe (2007), "is that lately our game isn't much fun to play" (p. 65). What progressives should learn from *GTA* is how to harness human desires for rebellion into an "ethical spectacle" that can create new realities for leftist

politics (Duncombe, 2007). A progressive ethical spectacle is “one that is directly democratic, breaks down hierarchies, fosters community, allows for diversity, and engages with reality while asking what new realities might be possible” (Duncombe, 2007, p. 126). I return to this perspective to conclude this project on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

The popularity of these shows demonstrates that they must appeal to certain audience desires, but there is a yawning absence of collective action, democratic participation, and ethics within the texts. Of course, like *GTA*, both shows contain elements of rebellion. Tony’s status in the organized crime world in which he operates means that he is able to avoid having a boring career path; instead he is able to live an extraordinary and adventurous life and to work with his best friends. Tony also lives largely outside of the law, unafraid to protect himself and his family from external threats. Walter is able to use his intelligence in creative ways to gain new power and thus escape a previously powerless life. The problem, however, is that both narratives tend to repeatedly support the conservative politics of neoliberalism and hegemonic, oppressive masculinity, as well as glorify crime, criminal acts, and violence. For these reasons, they are neither ethical nor helpful to progressive aims. Instead, these narratives inspire cutthroat business practices that value profits over humanity and, as a result, further neoliberal objectives, not progressive politics.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explores the sociocultural discourses surrounding *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, primarily concerning the moral qualities of discourse within the context of neoliberalism. The first section of this chapter presents discourses celebrating the so-called “Golden Age” of television, and subsequently criticized those perspectives through the development of the “liquid morality of neoliberalism.” The subsequent sections build upon this

concept in order to critically assess the blurred lines between businessmen and criminals, recent business journalism providing “lessons” from *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, and the discourses about *Breaking Bad*-related businesses in Albuquerque, NM. The following chapter concludes this thesis and suggests future directions for research.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes this thesis. The first section recaps my research questions concerning masculinity, neoliberalism, and morality and summarizes the answers to the questions that emerge from the analysis in chapters four, five, and six. The second section describes this project's theoretical contributions to both political economy and cultural studies. The third section discusses the project's limitations and suggests new areas for researchers interested in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*.

Findings

The summary of findings is derived from my textual analysis of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* as well as my analysis of sociocultural discourse surrounding the texts.

RQ1a: What Discourses about Masculinity and Neoliberalism are Constructed in *The Sopranos*?

The Sopranos constructs discourses about masculinity and neoliberalism through (1) building a relationship between usury and masculinity; (2) excluding women from the all-male world of financial success; and, (3) generating skepticism toward social programs and social movements.

The Sopranos constructs a discourse about masculinity and neoliberalism through the performance of usury throughout the show. Tony must enact a dominant form of hegemonic masculinity through physical intimidation to maintain his livelihood through usury. Discourses about Tony's victims tend to focus on the neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and self-management. He also preys on gambling addicts, exploiting their weaknesses for his own personal gain. The violent consequences of not paying Tony back fall under the rubric of

personal responsibility: these people knew what they were getting into and had a choice about how to behave. This discourse echoes those that dominate in the sphere of predatory lending, a business sector that targets the poor and has become more prevalent in the present neoliberal moment. The priority of the pursuit of profit through usury in *The Sopranos* outweighs any value that might otherwise be placed on peace, mutual aid, or humanity.

The series also constructs a discourse about masculinity and neoliberalism through the exclusion of women from the all-male financial sphere. Though Carmela controls money in some ways throughout the narrative, she must keep this activity a secret from Tony. Although Carmela expresses a desire for financial control and agency, this desire is not realized in the narrative; rather Tony remains in the center of the financial sphere, while Carmela is excluded. Discourses constructed about Janice center on her characterization as a lazy, druggie, countercultural hippie, who mooches off her brother Tony. Janice is characterized as manipulative and self-serving, while Tony is characterized as “earning” his money, despite the fact that his income is based on the crimes of extortion and usury. Finally, discourses about AJ Soprano’s girlfriend, Devin, obscure social conditions of poverty and focus on the link between masculinity and wealth. Repeatedly, discourses within the narrative involving each of these women symbolically link financial wealth with male genitalia.

Finally, *The Sopranos* constructs a discourse about masculinity and neoliberalism through generating skepticism within the strictly all-male organized crime network about social programs and social movements. Male labor union leaders, community leaders, and activists are all corrupt in *The Sopranos* and this reinforces a culture of cynicism about American social programs and social movements. Ronald Reagan’s narrative that “hard-working Americans were being victimized by a voracious government that took their money, handed it over to

undeserving social groups, and undermined the work ethic by punishing the diligent and rewarding the lazy” (Peck, 2011, p. 260) is supported in the text of *The Sopranos*. The narrative approaches organized labor, government programs, racial inequality, and social justice with a cynicism resigned to the “tidal wave” of neoliberalism. Perhaps no quote better illustrates this discourse than Maurice Tiffen’s statement: “Revolution? The revolution got sold, Ronnie.”

RQ1b: What Discourses about Masculinity and Neoliberalism are Constructed in *Breaking Bad*?

Breaking Bad constructs discourses about masculinity and neoliberalism through its representations of (1) entrepreneurialism; (2) providing for one’s family; and (3) technical and scientific solutions. Gender discourse relating to neoliberalism also shifts in *Breaking Bad* to include feminine characterizations as well as subordinate forms of masculinity.

The entrepreneur is culturally coded as masculine (Connell, 2010). This is supported in *Breaking Bad* through the connection between violence and success in business. Walter’s success as a white entrepreneur increases in step with the proliferation of violent solutions and reputations in the narrative. Morally abhorrent aggression and brutality are necessary for the goals of amassing as much wealth as possible, and these decisions are made with calculating rationality. The rationality of *Breaking Bad* also obscures the reality that profit-seeking drug makers/dealers exploit the methamphetamine addiction of lower-class citizens in order to realize huge profits. This form of masculinity brings Walter, as well as other characters in the narrative, success as an entrepreneur. Walter is “in the empire business,” which includes the violence and conquest historically characteristic of empire, factors which connect to the global conditions of neoliberalism. The representations of Walter as a successful white *criminal* entrepreneur emphasize cultural tolerance for white managerial crime. “Rough heroes” of the so-called

“Golden Age of Television” are white men with neoliberal agendas; it is doubtful that these criminals would be labeled “heroes” that serve as inspirations to corporate leaders in America if they were not white.

Breaking Bad also constructs discourses about masculinity and neoliberalism through the theme of providing for one’s family. Throughout the narrative Walter continually refuses charity in favor of self-reliance, no matter the cost. Taking charity is feminized and constructed as a weakness in *Breaking Bad*; the message that is communicated is that real men provide for their families. The contrast created between self-reliance and charity has a connection to neoliberalism through the metaphoric understanding of small government as masculine and large government as feminine. Sawyer (1999) states that the concept of the welfare state is incompatible with self-reliant masculinity; real men are not dependent, instead they create the individualized competition of “man against the state.” The concept of the welfare state contains racial connotations that exclude white men. As the dominant social figures, white men rely on class privilege, rendering social benefits as appropriate for nonwhite individuals. Thus, the concept of providing for one’s family without support from the state is central to cultural connotations of white men and Walter emphasizes these features.

Technical and scientific solutions in *Breaking Bad* construct discourses about white masculinity and neoliberalism as well. Walter’s power throughout the narrative depends on his scientific knowledge. Narrative conflict throughout *Breaking Bad* centers on technical problems that Walter must solve for the story to progress. As Walter becomes more powerful, and thus more overtly masculine, throughout the series, he celebrates his ability to solve problems using technical and scientific solutions, displaying pride and certainty. Walter’s abilities and intelligence in *Breaking Bad* relate to the flexible specialization of post-Fordist neoliberal

conditions. Flexible specialization refers to “multitasking” and adaptability that can be exploited for a variety of different operations within the flexible markets of neoliberalism (Barker, 2004). Walter’s flexible specialization is rewarded continually throughout *Breaking Bad*, contributing to his financial success.

Finally, *Breaking Bad* constructs gendered discourses that incorporate feminine and subordinate masculine characterizations of Skyler White and Gale Boetticher, respectively. Skyler exhibits a number of entrepreneurial characteristics throughout the narrative of *Breaking Bad*. She takes control over money laundering operations for Walter, demonstrates acute financial knowledge, and performs business negotiations with ease. These qualities thrust Skyler into direct conflict with the men in the financial sphere, which result in patriarchal discourse from Walter, Saul, and Bogdan, who all attempt to force her out of power. Another character who is discursively incorporated into the neoliberal context is Gale Boetticher, who is characterized as a subordinate male through his kind and caring qualities, his interests, and his aesthetics. Gale’s identification as a libertarian within the narrative of *Breaking Bad* connects to the self-management and personal responsibility central to neoliberalism. This identification also obscures the reality of his own participation in the encouragement of global methamphetamine addiction by, and thus the subjugation, of members of lower classes.

RQ 2: How Does Masculinity, as Constructed on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, Relate to Discourses about Neoliberalism?

The textual analyses in chapter four and five as well as the exploration of various sociocultural discourses presented in chapter six all demonstrate how discourses about masculinity relate to discourses about neoliberalism. The violence central to both narratives speaks to a primitive form of masculinity, which connects to entrepreneurial discourses that

advocate for eliminating competitors through aggressive and bold action. One central connection between masculinity and neoliberalism discovered in this project is white crime and criminality. The tendency to break the rules, to transcend the laws that govern common man, and to achieve a peculiar greatness and freedom in the face of oppressive state rule and social structures all seem to connect with entrepreneurial success as they are discursively constructed in the neoliberal context. However, not all men or women can achieve greatness through crime and transcend the laws that govern common man. Criminals are only coded as successful and heroic when they are white men. As audiences and critics celebrate *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, they also naturalize white male crime as social acceptable, especially when these men possess managerial and entrepreneurial characteristics central to neoliberal capitalism.

The emphasis on personal responsibility, self-management, and self-reliance are key to understanding both *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. These narratives construct discourses that emphasize the importance of the individual as the only governing body. This individual, ungoverned body is decidedly white and male because patriarchal themes lie at the heart of these male-centered serials that exclude women and construct the predominant competition of “man against the state” (Sawer, 1999). The individualized responsibility within these narratives also constructs cynicism about social programs and social movements. According to these narratives, it is ultimately up to the individual to change his or her own life; as in the game *GTA* (Barrett, 2006) there is no democratic public sphere, collective resistance, or mutual, political aid imagined in *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad*. These series’ perspectives reinforce a culture of cynicism (Barrett, 2006) in America that prioritizes individual achievements over the collective.

RQ 3: How Does Sociocultural Discourse about *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* Relate to Morality within the Context of Neoliberalism?

Discourse about morality constructed in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* leads to the development of the “liquid morality of neoliberalism.” As the analysis in chapter six demonstrates, the discourse inspired by and surrounding these programs prioritizes profit making over social responsibility. The conditions of neoliberalism obscure moral judgments in favor of the accumulation of wealth. Thus, the moral ambivalence central to *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* can be perceived as an outcome of the flexibility that permeates production, consumption, and content within the context of neoliberalism.

Theoretical Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

This project provides a number of theoretical contributions to political economy and critical cultural studies of popular media. It is uncommon for researchers to explore the gendered discourses of neoliberalism on popular media, but this project suggests that this is an important area of investigation. It is no coincidence that the conditions of neoliberalism primarily serve white, heterosexual men (Connell, 2010), thus understanding how the logic of neoliberalism contributes to the formation of identity through popular media consumption is a worthy pursuit for scholars. This project also contributes to theorizing about entrepreneurship, criminality, and the moral dimensions of neoliberalism. Very few researchers address issues of morality within neoliberalism and this avenue illuminates the moral implications of contemporary political structures that are largely taken as common sense. Finally, the connection between entrepreneurship and criminality is crucial to understanding how criminal and amoral themes exist in the world of business, and this connection should be developed through future research. At the same time that millions of viewers watch *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, crime is

continually marked in the United States as lower class and black. Thus, as cultural critics, we must ask the question: do some people have more privilege to “break bad” than others? And, how do popular media, like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, naturalize upper and middle class white crime in comparison to lower class black crime? The current project opens the door to how popular media texts, masked in rebellion, support the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and masculinity, but future projects should link *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* with the racialized social practices of marking criminals.

This project primarily relies on textual analysis, which is itself a limitation. Future research should engage audiences of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* about questions of identification with the central protagonists, masculinity, and moral issues. An additional limitation is the limited sociocultural discourse presented in chapter six. I primarily focus on discourses that celebrate Tony and Walter in the context of entrepreneurialism. Future research should seek out discourse and reception that criticizes these men for their actions in the respective narratives. Finally, more research is needed on the women of the so-called “Golden Age” of television. Though chapter four and chapter five both contain sections on female characters, chapter six does not address the sociocultural discourse surrounding these characters. Future research should consider this discourse and compare it to the reactions and interpretations of the male-lead counterparts.

The current project contributes to theoretical nuances in neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating the shared characteristics of these dominant ideologies through discourse. *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* make larger economic power structures accessible in ways that permeate identity politics of masculinity. This project presents a comprehensive textual analysis that contributes to the current research on these shows and to research attempting

to understand the impact of popular male-centered serials. Finally, the work here pushes political economy and cultural studies research to new avenues that consider moral implications of the dominant ideologies of neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity, represented through popular media.

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